

ENGLISH IN CROATIA - A GLIMPSE INTO PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Mirjana Vilke

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb

Summary - In the paper a short history of teaching English as a foreign language in Croatia is presented. It is stressed that English always went its own way, apart from the traditional ways other foreign languages, predominantly German and French, had been taught

English has been officially introduced into curriculum of the Croatian schools only after the World War II.

The present of English in Croatia has been investigated and presented by the researchers that took part in the Project English in Croatia. However, the author of the present article expresses some of her own opinions.

As for the future, it seems to be optimistic because of a lot of enthusiasm on the side of both researchers and practicing teachers who want to make most of the oportunities offered so far by the state of the art in the applied linguistics and the related disciplines.

Key words: *English, foreign language, project, research, teacher*

THE PAST

The position of English in Croatia in the past was drastically different from the position of other foreign languages taught and learnt in this region either because of their political or their cultural prestige. In areas that were parts of the Austro-Hugarian Empire German and Hungarian were dominating the cultural, political and educational scenes for centuries, along with Latin as the language of the Church and science. Croatian, after a long struggle for an official language status, finally won its place and gradually penetrated the political and cultural life - mainly through the education system in which it was introduced as the language

of instruction. German became the most important foreign language, especially in northern Croatia, whereas Hungarian, due to political circumstances – the downfall of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the forming of Yugoslavia in 1918 – was reduced to the language of the Hungarian national minority.

As a medium of revolutionary ideas, politics, culture and science already in the 19th century French became the language of communication among educated layers of the society throughout Europe regardless of their vernaculars. Numerous literary works by Croatian writers (e.g., by Gjalski, Šenoa, Kovačić, Kumičić) from the second half of the 19th century on, who incorporated French expressions in their stories and novels, testify that the same was true in Croatia. Up to World War II, French and German joined Latin as part of the curriculum of every respectable secondary school in Croatia. At that time, foreign languages were taught via methods tested throughout centuries on Latin, and their main aim was to contribute to the general knowledge of the students of the ‘gimnazija’, who were meant to become civil servants or professionals attending universities. With few exceptions, this kind of schools was reserved for higher layers of the society. The slogan *No one ever learned how to speak a foreign language in school* resonated in the Croatian education system until very recently: the focus was mostly on study about the language and its culture, primarily literature, whereas communication – that is, the art of speaking – was left to other resources.

Up to 1945 English appeared only sporadically. For example, Natalija Wickerhauser taught English at the Women’s High School in Zagreb, while Aleksandar Lochmer taught English at the Nautical School in Bakar at the end of the 19th century (Filipović, 1972). They were not just ordinary teachers but very prominent linguists of the time. Lochmer taught a sort of ESP for students of nautical schools, which was quite unique at the time. He also wrote the first textbook of English phonetics for Croats and a grammar of English. He also authored an English-Croatian dictionary published in 1906. N. Wickerhauser theoretically belonged to the followers of the then young Direct Method and as such published in international journals (e.g., *Die Neuren Sprachen*). Thanks to her influence English was introduced into women’s upper secondary school as an option with five class periods of weekly tuition. It is interesting to note that these early English scholars, working in a traditional and inflexible educational system, had the courage and capacity to launch theoretically new advanced ideas and also apply them in practice. According to objective and competent observers, this trait has characterised teaching English as a foreign language in Croatia up to the present time. A. Lochmer was the first English language instructor when English Language and Literature was introduced as a major at Zagreb University in 1898. After 20 years of discontinuity following his death, English was introduced again with the arrival of Professor Torbarina, the Oxford scholar. Up to the beginning of World War II few students graduated in English and the following years of complete domination of the German *Reich* did not offer much opportunity for development of English studies. However, quite a number of high-profile English scholars mana-

ged to complete their studies, the leading personality among them being Rudolf Filipović, who was very much present on the Croatian educational scene for the next six decades. Few among the educated classes could boast a good command of English after World War II. Among modern foreign languages and foreign cultures German and French were still dominant. There were not many teachers, either, who could teach the growing population of pupils opting for English as a second foreign language (Russian was the first and compulsory foreign language). In 1948, Russian loses its priority among foreign languages due to political reasons (splitting with the Soviet Union) so students could choose among English, German, French and Russian. In the 50s and 60s of the 20th century the number of students of English steadily increased. The number of students of German was low after the war, to increase in the following decades due to the growing number of our guest workers in Western Germany. This dynamic picture of rise and fall in popularity of different foreign languages reflects the impact of the social and political context on foreign language learning.

Had it not been for major interventions from across the Atlantic, the teaching of English within the framework of our education system would probably have gone through the trodded paths of grammar-translation or, with the most progressive teachers, the Direct Method. However, Rudolf Filipović tried to introduce the International Phonetic Transcription in his textbooks but he faced a very strong opposition by the traditionalist textbook reviewers. Then, in the fifties, American structuralism happened in this area, coming in through the back door as a course of English. Like a Trojan horse, it was suddenly here as an American aid for those who had to become proficient in English in no time so that they could use their scholarships in English-speaking countries. Those scholarships were ‘swallowed’ even by the Communist politicians as the country badly needed professionals who could help it recuperate after the war. This was the beginning of the alternative educational system for foreign languages, which functioned regardless of the Iron Curtain. The organization of the first institutionalized course of English was put into the hands of Rudolf Filipović, who made sure that the teaching was conducted according to the most recent teaching methods based on Bloomfield’s structuralism. The model for the courses was the successful American undertaking of ASTP (*Army Specialized Training Program*). The new system developed along the official school system and its traditions but, as it spread and as the teachers sometimes moved from one into the other, it exerted its influence on teaching English in general. Moreover, it touched the surface of teaching other foreign languages and so special courses in German and French followed, on the principles of some exotic doctrine which came up with tape-recorders and the voices of native speakers. The movement could not be stopped. Looking back, it seems that in the 60s and the 70s of the 20th century there was an idyllic cooperation among the key people responsible for the improvement of teaching of English from the Department of English of Zagreb University, the Ministry of Education, the British Council and some other institutions. The joint efforts resulted in the en-

gagement of internationally renowned experts to teach in the seminars for teachers of English, a number of scholarships were granted to promising teachers, donations of books and journals contributed to the quality of teaching of English, which could boast up-to-datedness and high quality in spite of political limitations.

The TEFL Section teaching staff at the Department of English, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Zagreb University have always tried to present to the prospective teachers of English the most recent results of disciplines relevant to teaching FL, such as applied linguistics, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics. This very often provoked criticism of those who wanted to see TEFL subjects as collections of recipes for the use in class. The same trends were observed in the TEFL sections of other universities in Croatia that started studies in these areas in the 80s and 90s of the past century.

Such an approach inevitably called for research and testing of theoretical issues, so the last decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st were marked by numerous longitudinal, cross-sectional and action research studies on different school populations. The postgraduate study in FL education that started in 1978 offered a valid framework for this type of activity. Besides, a number of doctoral students from different parts of Croatia and beyond prepared their degree researching processes of learning and teaching foreign languages in different school environments. As such studies are by definition interdisciplinary, in very many cases the cooperation of psychologists, linguists, sociologists and pedagogical experts was imperative. Speaking about logistics that governed teaching in the class numerous research projects conducted since 1970s should be mentioned.

The first international project was organized and conducted by R. Filipović, who was the pioneer of innovations that took place in Croatia from 1945 to his death in 2000. It was a project of contrastive analysis of Croatian and English both linguistically and pedagogically biased. The contrastive description of English and Croatian grammar categories were supposed to reveal what areas presented difficulties for the Croatian learners of English. The project was organized in all linguistic centres of the former state, ex-Yugoslavia, its name being YSCECP (Yugoslav Serbo-Croatian English Contrastive Project). It was sponsored by the Ford Foundation in the USA. A large number of studies which shed new light on different linguistic items were produced by the members of the project, and techniques to facilitate the difficult parts of grammar were offered (Filipović, 1975). Research on early learning of English started also in the 70s. It was carried out in three stages (Vilke, 1976a, 1986b, 1979). On the basis of this research a new project on early learning was initiated in 1991. Four languages – English, French, German and Italian – were introduced on experimental basis into the first grade of primary school (age 7). At the beginning, the project was supported by the Ministry of Education but, unfortunately, some time in the middle of the project the head staff in the Ministry changed and the climate suddenly turned unfavourable for the project. However, thanks to the enthusiasm of the teachers who worked

for the project and the project researchers the project went on gaining outstanding results. Four theoretical books (Vilke & Vrhovac, 1993; Vilke & Vrhovac, 1995; Vrhovac et al., 1999; Vrhovac, 2001) were published, and textbooks and other teaching materials were produced. In spite of being internationally acknowledged and its results widely used it was not as lucky in the home country whose young learners it was intended in the first place. It was not taken into consideration even when the FL was introduced on a compulsory basis into the first grade of primary school in 2003 and the confused teachers could not benefit from its results. Sad but true! As a next major project the investigation of students' motivation and other affective factors should be mentioned. It resulted in a new typology of kinds of motivations prevalent in our context. It also contributed to a better understanding of the learner as a whole person (Mihaljević Djigunović, 1998; Mihaljević Djigunović 2002).

We tried to draw a sketch of the activities that governed the actual work in the ELT field. But what about the work in the class itself? Have the efforts that were attempted for decades fallen on good soil? Has the teaching of English been improved? Is competence in English of our learners satisfactory? What is the level of communication in English of our speakers?

THE PRESENT

The answer to the above questions will be offered in the studies which follow and which are the result of the research project *English in Croatia*. The courage to plan a research project of national significance, to offer it to the Ministry of Education, to carry out all the necessary work and to present it to the public proves the high level of competences and abilities of this group of researchers better than any comments. It is on the readers to evaluate the quality of papers and their importance for the national policy in the area of TEFL.

Accordingly, the readers will find all the necessary information in the papers themselves. However, a research project by its definition cannot embrace all the aspects of everyday reality, so a few subjective impressions will be attempted in the present paper.

It seems that there is room for optimism. Cooperation between the educational authorities, on the one hand, and universities and schools, on the other, seems to be much better and the problems are being solved by the joint efforts of all the involved parties. If only the early learning project had been carried out in such an atmosphere!

In 2006 a doctoral programme was offered in FL education, the first in the history of this discipline in this country and its 23 students make an enthusiastic group eager to solve all the research tasks they are faced with.

In the last few months two doctoral theses in TEFL were defended and each of them will have direct and indirect implications on the improvement of tea-

ching practice (Šamo 2006; Bagarić 2007). TEFL teams at universities in Zagreb, Osijek, Zadar, Split, Rijeka and Pula participate and head many national and international projects and, as visiting professors and researchers, deliver lectures and workshops all over the world.

A new trend can be observed among pre-service students of English. The teaching option at the departments of English language and literature used to be only a safe choice and not a true wish for a future career, whereas now an increasing number of students show interest in the teaching profession. They participate in research projects run by TEFL sections and are often recipients of awards like the Rector's Award. Insufficient motivation for the teaching profession in the past was the result of a relatively low social status of teachers in our society. This was reinforced by the very traditional system of study which did not take into consideration the real needs of future teachers. So, our hopes are turned to the Bologna Reform which might provide opportunities for a better initial teacher education.

The new profile of the homeroom teacher who is at the same time a teacher of English educated at teacher training colleges seems the right option for early grades of primary schools. For the time being, the status of graduate students with this profile has not been properly defined. The problem that remains is to define the difference in job qualifications of such graduates and specialist English teachers majoring at university departments of English. It is essential that all colleges model their curricula after the Zagreb Teacher Education Faculty, which achieved a very high level. However, this is a matter for future considerations.

THE FUTURE

Should we try to create a vision of the future? Hardly, as the most important indicators are already laid down. It would be of vital importance for the educational authorities to decide on the policy and position of FLs within our state educational system and ensure continuity of such policy. Here is a suggestion which is already partly in function but partly cannot be put into practice because of private lobbies. We do not want to repeat the worn-out phrase about Croatia as a part of Europe. Suffice it to say that one path to this destination leads via the ability of as many citizens as possible to communicate in at least one of the world languages. Presently, English is definitely the language that can take our citizens the furthest way and which is the easiest way to communicate with the rest of the world. This becomes obvious when we listen to the interviews with experts from different walks of life, from politicians to artists, sportsmen and businessmen, that are offered daily on TV screens. No matter what their native language is, in most cases they use English, not because they are infatuated with the language or the people, but for purely pragmatic reasons – to be understood by as many people as possible. It would be rather merciless to deprive our young generations of the easiest and simplest possibility to communicate with the members of other language

communities. Therefore, we suggest that English finally be introduced as a compulsory first FL into our state educational system from the first grade of primary school to the end of schooling, so that it can easily become the language of spontaneous oral and written communication in work and everyday life of Croatian citizens. Likewise, a second foreign language should be finally introduced into the fourth grade of primary school at the latest, and learners and parents should decide which widely spoken language it should be. In this way one of the pedagogic axioms – from easier to more difficult – and from simpler to more complex – would be fulfilled. For, whether we want it or not, English is at the moment for various reasons we cannot get into at this point the easiest FL for our learners. It is common knowledge that every additional foreign language is easier to acquire. Why not give our pupils a possibility to master at least two FLs in the easiest and most pleasant way? The citizens of Europe belonging to small language communities as ours will have to be able to communicate in two languages widely spoken. At the same time, care should be taken to protect Croatian from an unnecessary load of language loans, especially English ones, a process which is unfortunately already underway.

Those who speak FLs well do not as a rule use half-understood trendy foreign words. Our students should be made aware of the necessity to develop communicative competence in their own mother tongue, at the same time using FLs in communication with members of other language communities.

This calls for intensive cooperation of all stakeholders in the area of languages, first language as well as FLs, from the Minister and the Ministry of Education to the remotest village school.

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