

Distinguished Teaching Experts

MIRJANA VILKE – A PRODUCTIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODOLOGIST

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BIOGRAPHY



Until autumn 2000 Mirjana Vilke, PhD was full professor at the Department of English of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. She had been Head of the Chair for English Language Teaching Methodology within the Department of English since its founding.

She was born in 1931 in Zagreb where she graduated from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in 1954 majoring English language and literature and Yugoslavian languages and literature. In 1970 she got her Master's degree, and in 1975 her doctorate. She worked as a teacher and lecturer in schools and the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering in Rijeka. In 1968 she was promoted into lecturer for English language teaching methodology at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. A promotion into senior lecturer followed in 1973. In 1975, she became assistant professor and in 1980 associate professor. Her promotion into full professor was in 1996. In 2005, prof. Mirjana Vilke became *professor emerita* at the University of Zagreb. As author and coauthor she published nine books (of which one was translated into Slovene and one which saw several editions by Pergamon Press was published in the English language and later translated into German and Italian languages) and about seventy scientific and professional articles.

Throughout her fruitful career she worked on her professional development and spent some time abroad: Nottingham University (1955-1956), University College London (1956), University of Oxford (1969). She actively participated in numerous congresses, seminars, workshops and conferences in Croatia and abroad. She is a reputable member of many Croatian and international professional associations (Croatian Philological Society, Croatian Association for Applied Linguistics, Croatian Association for Anglophone Studies, Croatian Association of Teachers of English, International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language, Association Internationale de Linguistiques Appliquée, European Society for the Study of English).

Mirjana Vilke is the founder of the postgraduate program of study of foreign language teaching methodology at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb and had been its head for ten years. From 1991 to 1996 she had been a researcher in the project “*I „Investigation in the process of FL learning/acquisition*” supported by the Ministry of Science and Technology of the Republic of Croatia.

In addition to regular lecturing, Mirjana Vilke was a very successful Chair of the Department of English, a mentor to many master and doctoral students, president and member of numerous committees of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, the Ministry of Education and Sports, the Ministry of Science and Technology and was a professional advisor for foreign language teaching for many institutions (e.g. the Faculty of Education in Zagreb, the Faculty of Education in Ljubljana, etc.).

In 1997, she received the Charter of the Croatian community of popular and open universities for developing and promoting adult education, culture, andragogy theory and practice and in 1999 she received the National Award *Ivan Filipović* for promoting pedagogical theory and practice.

After her promotion into full professor, Mirjana Vilke actively participated in scientific and professional conferences in Croatia and abroad and published scientific and professional papers. Upon retiring in the autumn of 2000 she remained active and is an associate at the Department of English. She is course leader for several courses in the postgraduate program of study “glotodidactics”, mentor to postgraduate students for their seminar papers, master’s thesis and doctoral thesis. Mirjana Vilke is an associate at the University in Bihać, member of the editorship of the journal *Metodika*, reviewer of teaching materials for renowned publishers (e.g. Longman, Oxford University Press), author of teaching materials and scientific books, president of the committee for professional teaching licenses, president and member of the committee for the promotion into research-teaching professions, and master’s and doctoral theses at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb.

DR. SC. MIRJANA VILKE, PROF. EMERITA

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INTERVIEW

You taught English language teaching methodology at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. Did you transition to this position right after graduating or did you acquire some work experience at another institution?

Prior to coming to the Faculty I had accumulated 12 years of experience from various institutions. I can even say that I have moved through our educational system from top to bottom. After graduating, I tried getting a job as an English teacher at one of the schools in Zagreb, but that proved to be rather difficult even at that time, almost half a century ago. After many unsuccessful attempts, I turned to my university teacher, prof. Filipović for help and he recommended the so called *Course for English language learning*. That was an interesting institution. During the 1950s a complete course for teaching English to adults who had to undergo professional development in English speaking countries arrived via American aid. The Americans sent their materials, initially even their teachers, and that was the first time that the Zagreb audience was actually exposed to magnetic tape recorders. That set off a chain of peculiar stories on the effects of such tape recorders.

The story in Zagreb had it that you sit in a box (cubicle) and language simply infiltrated you. Of course, many found it to be extremely harmful health-wise just as some thought that the speed of the railroad, at the time of its invention, was deadly for man. The English language courses were very intense, a group met every other day for 4-5 hours and demanded a lot of preparation. Being exposed to English literature, I had to switch to American spoken language. In the mornings I would work at the school, and in the afternoons I had to prepare for the lessons. At night, I would dream of the materials and students. Over the years that intensive course grew into an institution which exists to this day in Vodnikova street. I believe it is called "Svijet jezika". While working at that institution I also carried out a course for preschool children, which was a rarity at the time. When I got married, I moved to Rijeka and worked as an English language teacher at the teacher's school and in a primary school. The founding of the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering marked the beginning of my teaching of English for specific purposes.

What was the attitude towards teaching methodology when you started working at the faculty?

Before we move on, I suggest that we speak to each other in a less formal tone and stop pretending that we barely know each other. We have a long history of friendship and professional cooperation behind us. I remember you as my student when you used to sit in the back rows, always carefully listening to what I had to say, yet never saying a word. Whenever I would ask you something, you always had a ready answer, and always said what was relevant. On the other hand, I used to have fearful thoughts about what such a serious girl thought of me. Later on, you passed my postgraduate exam, became my assistant, and did everything in sequence. Today, whenever I cooperate with the Chair for Methodology, you are actually my *boss*.

Nevertheless, let me answer your question about the atmosphere at the Department of English Language, i.e. methodology at the time. When I arrived in 1968 there had been no A and B students of English language. Both had one semester of teaching methodology – two hours of lectures, two hours of seminars and some teaching practice. None of the colleagues thought that methodology should be an important subject. I remember the words of late Željko Buajs when he met me at the Faculty and heard that I was going to teach methodology: "Methodology, what is that again?" Ah yes! That is basically about what to write on which side of the blackboard in a classroom." From that moment, I tried to prove to all that there is much more, and more important to teaching methodology. In other words, what one writes on the blackboard is only the completion of a very long process. But providing such evidence was not always easy. Even my desire to write a doctoral thesis stumbled upon some obstacles. After all, why would a teaching methodologist need a doctoral degree?

As a teacher of methodology you took on several great initiatives – founded the Chair for methodology, organized the postgraduate program of study in foreign language teaching methodology, initiated the application of the findings of the project of contrastive analysis in English language teaching, introduced the project of early language learning in our schools. Could you say something about each of these initiatives?

Of course, although, it would perhaps be more interesting if I could say a few words about what was happening *back-stage*, as it is popularly said in Croatian these days. I say this because what can be observed on the outside is already mentioned in my biography and bibliography, and in various professional and scientific papers.

Let us begin with the Chair

At first, I was by myself with hundreds of students each year. Jasna Bilinić Zubak joined me but not for long since she took on a position of “lector” for the English language. So, basically until your arrival, I was actually alone. Yet, the work load was increasing and English was becoming more and more popular with pupils in primary school. The country was opening up to foreign countries and there was a need to be present at various conferences, publish in domestic and foreign publications, etc. Teaching methodology was taught at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in different language departments as part of language chairs. The only existing Chair for Methodology was the one for Croatian Language and Literature. When I suggested that the Chair for Teaching Methodology be founded, the idea was met with opposition by many colleagues. However, after several attempts and with the help of prof Filipović did I succeed in this attempt.

How did you manage to establish the postgraduate program of study?

This is a subject that you should actually be talking about since you were one of the first participants in the first generation of that program of study. Nevertheless, I will say a few words about the reasons which prompted me to initiate the organization of that program of study. A need for further development was recognized among foreign language teachers not only in practical work but also in scientific research of particular aspects of teaching. At that time, I had already received my doctoral degree which presented the first research in English language teaching in our country. I created a program of study which was approved at the Faculty and the University Vice-Chancellor’s office and the first generation of students (about 20) enrolled into the program. Part of the lectures was conducted together with students in the postgraduate linguistics program. A lot of work was put into obtaining all formal permissions. In addition to the university authority, approval had to be obtained from the municipal interest community (Cro. *SIZ*). That was a community which stemmed from the system of self-government and was made up of representatives of various profiles in the school system. So, while our students

were already working hard in the program, I had to make sure that all permits were obtained and considered this final part only as a formality since all other permits were obtained from the University. However, I was yet to face the shock of my life. When I arrived at the parliament meeting and presented my program in order to obtain permission for its realization, one colleague who had most likely never even approached the doors of a faculty said: Comrades, this cannot be approved, it is far too expensive for us.” If we need professionals in that area let them go to Belgrade or Paris and study. My arguments that students are paying tuition by themselves, and that this is not a burden on the educational system was in vain. My proposal was renounced. If at that time I did not get a heart-attack, I believe I never will get one. Upset as I was, I rushed to the Council for Education (Cro. *Prosvjetni savjet*), whose president was prof. Pero Šimleša. These were my words: “There, for your information, my proposal was rejected, even though my students are already working. This means that you can actually prosecute me since I undertook this without a final permit. However, since that is not my territory anymore, I give in.” The president of the Council for Education (Cro. *Prosvjetni savjet*) and his secretary tried to calm me down saying that not everything is lost since a forum is meeting the following day which could approve the program. And, that is precisely how the story ended. Without much explanation, this second forum (in honesty, I never fully got to understand the organization of all those self-governing bodies) actually approved the program of study and work continued.

I also remember sitting in lectures with the first generation in order to see how the aims of all those lectures will merge into a final outcome. This however was not met with enthusiasm by my colleagues since they perceived it as a kind of control. The program of study yielded a series of masters’ theses in the area of foreign language teaching methodology of which many successfully applied their newly-acquired knowledge for improving teaching.

Wasn't the contrastive analysis project carried out by prof. Filipović in Zagreb of a linguistic nature for the majority part?

During the 70s and 80s many projects of contrastive analysis between the mother tongue and foreign language acquisition were initiated in Europe and America. You are right. That was an actual linguistic hit to which numerous publications were dedicated and which was talked about at many conferences and conferences on linguistics and applied linguistics. Prof. Filipović created the project so that in addition to its linguistic function it had its pedagogical function. As I was a methodologist, he entrusted me with the development of that pedagogical scheme. Of course, all of this took place during the era when foreign language teaching methodology was based on structuralism in linguistics and therefore the application of contrastive analysis placing emphasis on developing exercises and drills. Nearly all members of the Chair for the English language were involved in the project and a large number of publications were written on the similarities and

differences between English and Croatian in various grammatical categories. The assumption behind contrastive analysis was that difficulties in foreign language learning will occur wherever there is a difference between particular categories. My task was to test the assumptions of linguists on students and consequently develop a system of tasks which will make learning grammatical categories easier (where difficulties were anticipated). Our professional meetings which took place every two weeks were very inspiring and through discussions we reached a number of conclusions. Contrastive analysis, however, regardless of its popularity at the time, soon disappeared from the linguistic scene, since it simplified many issues and did not address the core of a problem. What remained however among all of the participants in the project was the awareness of the importance of the role which students' mother tongue has in the acquisition of a foreign language. Many teaching methods attempted to solve the question of mother tongue by either starting with the mother tongue or completely ignoring it. Contrastive analysis paved the way to a deeper awareness of the role of the mother tongue and I believe that we have reached excellent results in the use of mother tongue even at that extralinguistic level, when not only language is the issue but also the culture of the people speaking that language.

How was early language learning actually initiated?

That is actually a very long story. When I finally got the approval to write my doctoral thesis, I chose the topic "The influence of linguistic theories on foreign language learning methods". My mentor, Prof. Filipović, insisted that I undertake some type of linguistic research in my thesis. I was perplexed by this request and did not know where to start since no one in our community had ever done anything like that before. Luckily, I remembered my amazement at the postulations of Eric Lenneberg in his book "Biological foundations of language". Eric Lenneberg linked the development of a child's first language with the development of the brain and established the so called critical period hypothesis. By observing aphasia patients at a clinic in Harvard he noticed that post puberty patients suffering from aphasia were not capable of establishing their speech again. At one point in his book, he mentions that it is likely that the reason why those starting to learn a foreign language after puberty can never entirely adopt its pronunciation lies in the brain. At that time, such an intriguing statement gave sufficient grounds for research. With a group of students I organized English lessons for 60 beginners, pre-puberty (age 9) and post-puberty (ages 16-19). In terms of acquiring pronunciation, Lenneberg's statements proved to be entirely correct. I got my doctorate, however my great interest in learning English at an early age remained and with the help of students and some colleagues I was able to further pursue my research. In the late 1970s I organized experimental English language learning for second graders in five suburban schools. I cannot provide all the details regarding the results of that research – many papers were written in that respect – however, that

research provided a series of data on learning a foreign language at an early age. During the war laden 1990s the Ministry of Education began the experimental program of introducing a foreign language into the first grade of primary school. Foreign language teaching methodologists from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb were invited by the Ministry to participate in the program. Naturally, we accepted and considering that we had the majority of the logistics from previous researches, together with practitioners we were able to carry out excellent work. This was a project which showed how much work can be accomplished when theorists and practitioners unite in a common task. I used to say that that was a happy marriage between theory and practice. We also had the support of the Ministry, in particular Mrs. Naima Balić, advisor. We published three books of professional and scientific papers in foreign languages and one in Croatian and together with Filmoteka 16 taped the results of early language learning in first and fourth grades. In other words, it was too good to be true. And, although hard to believe, such harmony came to an end with the staffing changes that took place at the Ministry the new Minister did not accept any of the proposals, thus the project was abruptly stopped.

While I was in Bangalore last year at the world conference on early learning, the leading professional for early learning prof. Richard Johnstone addressed you as the person who created a movement in the area of early foreign language learning in the early 1990s. Two new books – one by authors Edelenbos, Johnstone and Kubanek and the second edited by Marianne Nikolov, contain a dedication to you as one of the key persons in that area. These are world renowned and acknowledged authors and professionals. How did you meet such recognition?

It has a very comforting effect after all of the disappointments we experienced at home. I'll give you one example which deeply hurt me. While the project was being carried out and when all of us were doing our very best considering the difficult times our country was in and during which we achieved excellent results, the already mentioned Minister made a statement for one of the papers saying that nobody does anything for free, implying that some of us had material benefits from our work. In this day and age, I am a little less confused regarding that matter than at that time after listening to all kinds of affairs coming up in various companies, and I can only conclude that the Minister who came from that circle of people was only capable of thinking along those lines. When foreign languages were officially introduced into the first grade in 2003, little advice was sought from us, although the results of our project could have been of great help to teachers.

What is your opinion on the current state of affairs in teaching methodology?

I don't know enough about teaching methodology of other subjects in order to speak about methodology in general. I can only say that the situation in English language teaching methodology is promising owing to the efforts of individuals

such as you and other members of our Chair – Marta Medved Krajnović, Renata Geld, Stela Letica Krevelj. Our other colleagues from centers in Zadar, Osijek, Split, Rijeka, Pula also contribute to the situation. I believe that a lot has been done and that we can stand alongside the most developed centers in the world regarding research work and publication of results. The results of the multinational European project *Early Language Learning in Europe*, according to which our young language learners were the best in comparison with students in six other countries, sound more than promising.

How do you rate the newest changes in the education of foreign language teachers?

Perhaps this will sound pretentious to some, but you must remember how some several decades ago I advocated the ideas which are actually carried out through the Bologna process today. There is even written evidence on that at the Faculty. I am glad that we finally realized that teacher education is extremely important and complex, demanding a lot of attention and time within the program of study. It is well known that our teaching diplomas were not recognized throughout the world since the amount and content of courses intended for teacher education were far from standards set by universities around the world. Teacher education cannot be seen apart from the concept of interdisciplinarity. In the case of foreign language teacher education we include linguistics, i.e. psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics. During the last decades research in the area of second language acquisition also became important and such research is not possible without the application of new communication technologies. The fact that prior to the Bologna process the representation of courses which develop teaching competences was approximately 7% showed how far behind we were from European standards. In the process of harmonizing our programs with European programs it was necessary to raise this to the minimal ration of 20%. Of course, this was met with a lot of opposition by many colleagues who believed that the basic profession would be disadvantaged. Obviously, they do not understand that we are referring to acquiring an additional, new profession to which developed countries devote between 20 and 35% of the program in higher education. I hold that in addition to increasing “teaching” courses it is good that we are finally giving teaching practice the worthy position which is structured in a new way in our programs and actually creates a meaningful entity with the theoretical courses. It is a shame that we had to wait for so long for such a system of education to be implemented.

What are your visions on what will be happening with teaching and foreign languages in general in the future?

The era of monolingual societies is definitively behind us. The English language will surely continue to be used as a lingua franca for the next decades in western civilization. That should be kept in mind when organizing mandatory Eng-

lish language teaching for all students from beginning to the end of their education. I believe that the idea of classroom teachers who are qualified for teaching English in the first four years of primary school should be seriously reconsidered. According to the results so far, the profile of a classroom teacher competent for teaching the English language is optimal. However, the influence of other languages must not be ignored. Just as it is the case in business where we must take into consideration the economies of India, China and even Russia, we must also realize that in foreign language learning there is a shift from learning traditional prestigious languages such as French towards languages of densely populated countries freed from colonial constraints which are becoming world powers. In that respect, we should not overlook Spanish which is gaining a lot of popularity worldwide.

Translation from Croatian: Ivana Cindrić