

CONTINUITY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Summary: Early exposure to foreign languages raises a series of issues in terms of designing and implementing language policies. The educational system uniformity, ensuring continuity not only at the primary level, but also a smooth transition between the primary and secondary, as well as secondary and higher education levels, demands a harmonization of objectives, coherent organisation and systematic continuity of learning experiences at all the levels of education. It also implies an exchange of information and dissemination of good practices and awareness raising regarding relevant issues via staff development programmes, establishing relationships between primary and secondary school staff. Joint cross-sector in-service training is among the frequently cited recommendations for the process of facilitating this continuity, enabling primary and secondary teachers to share insights, materials, and methodologies. Research-oriented programmes, planning and post-implementation activities, and parental involvement are additional indispensable aspects contributing to continuity.

Key words: language policy uniformity, primary, secondary, higher education levels, dissemination of good practices, cross-sector training

Introduction

Modern era has seen a series of instances and models of reforms and streamlining of language teaching policies and practices. Among the key principles when considering the proposed modifications of the existing programmes, *continuity* holds a significant position.

By *continuity* in this paper we mean not only pedagogical continuity provided between pre-primary, primary, secondary and higher education sectors, transition from one system to another, but also continuity in terms of availability of one language through and across all levels of education of an individual.

While discussing foreign language education in the primary, it is important not only to ensure continuity within the primary sector, but also to think forward to secondary and higher education in order to ensure harmonisation of objectives, coherence and progression between primary and secondary education levels.

Another important issue nowadays is the fact that recommendations of the Council of Europe move towards *full integration* through the medium of embedding

the foreign language teaching in aspects of the primary curriculum, by developing *cross-curricular links, or transversal aims*.

On the other hand, to enable systematic continuity of learning experiences and smooth transition between the primary and secondary sector as well as higher education, there are several important obstacles that should be overcome, including: insufficient contact between the teachers in primary and secondary schools, impoverished awareness in the secondary schools of the learning objectives in the primary sector, teaching styles and approaches that do not take the children's prior learning into account, insufficient availability of qualified teachers, application of appropriate methodologies for the given age groups.

The proposed remedies imply proper *curriculum staging* as well as due attention being given to *learner autonomy*, which is believed to ensure continuity in situations typical to a change of schools (from primary to secondary education and to university). At the same time, it is disputable whether it can safeguard continuity in the case of change of staff or a change of school within the primary sector.

To overcome these potential obstacles educational systems should focus on awareness-raising among policy-makers regarding continuity, then collaboration between the sectors – primary education, secondary schools and faculties, transfer of information i.e. dissemination of good practices, provision of training as a form of continuing professional development for the teaching staff, contributing to unification or approximation of teaching and learning objectives.

Brief outline of the major findings of foreign language education

Following is a list of common aspects that are being considered in the process of designing of the language education programmes.

- Horizontal and vertical coordination (coherence and continuity) in language policies
- Horizontal – (Coherence) - national, minority and foreign languages
- Vertical –(Continuity) – pre-primary, primary, secondary and higher education sectors
- Anticipation of social economic, social and cultural trends
- The age when it most appropriate to start teaching the first, and when second and third foreign language
- The number of foreign languages to be offered
- The length (how many hours per week, and how many years) of teaching foreign languages
- The status of obligatory or optional
- Language as a medium – a dilemma regarding Bilingual education or CLIL
- Dominance of the English language
- Perception of English as lingua franca

- Diversified offer of foreign languages
- Order of introduction of the first, second and third foreign languages (ex. Luxembourg – Luxemburgish is offered first, then German since it is genetically closer and then French)
- There is tendency of selection among the most frequent languages, but the question is how to provide balance in the offer and presence of languages in the levels of education
- Parents (in official groups) represent a significant factor in the selection of a particular language, design of policies, so their attitudes are taken into consideration seriously
- Textbooks used should be in line with the national needs and didactic objectives prescribed by the relevant domestic institutions (while complying with the commitments regarding EU-related common policies).

In light with the constant modernization and reforms of language teaching policies

Italy

In terms of early language learning, experiments are implemented regarding early exposure to foreign language learning – pre-school institutions – in both private and public sectors.

The social context also allows a room for early language learning i.e. Italian for immigrants. In addition, English as a medium of instruction is offered in Universities, in order to attract foreign students.

Poland

German or Russian should be considered in terms of ELL (early language learning) not English automatically, due to historical presence of these languages. Bilingual teaching also has a long tradition in Poland.

Ermenia

In addition to Russian, German, French and English are taught and share the same status.

Slovenia

The studies regarding foreign languages have demonstrated that if foreign languages have the status of optional, then there is greater probability of absence of continuity.

Austria

Austria abounds in examples of good practice and innovative teaching. Regarding sizeable immigrant communities, there is a number of available teachers for teaching Croatian, Serbian and Turkish.

Luxemburg

French is generally used in trade, business and civil engineering, while Luxemburgish for public administration.

German as a medium of instruction is used for subjects – mathematics, science, history, geography, religion, sociology. Biology, history and geography are taught in German in secondary school as well.

French is learnt from the second year in primary education and it continues –in secondary school Mathematics is taught in French.

Studies on *the impact of foreign language learning on educational success* have resulted in the following findings:

- Advantages

Numerous students from Luxemburg are highly successful at foreign universities and it is partly attributed to the significant mastery of foreign languages.

- Disadvantages – insufficient school success

Part of the absence of success is attributed to inability to retain the ability in foreign languages as a medium.

Finland

Finland is known for its attempts for *learner autonomy*, and teaching students how to learn languages.

Ireland

The approach “English is enough” is also typical for Ireland.

Possibilities for *Immersion Education* and *CLIL* are also considered.

The need for coordination between the education sectors including universities is regarded as crucial.

Cyprus

- So called ‘transversal aims’ are stressed – promoting interconnection between different subjects – there should be cross-curricular cooperation.
- language rooms are supported – equipped with literature and equipment for self-study and a useful contribution for potential students preparing to study abroad.
- Quality textbooks are needed – as a pre-requisite for successful teaching. Still it is realized that there is insufficient domestic production. Textbooks are from foreign publishers British or French,, but still the objectives of these textbooks do not correspond with the objectives at the national level.

Hungary

Bilingual education is supported by the Government

Learning a foreign language can be of instrumental/economic purposes as well as inclusive and democratic.

In the western part of Hungary for example English is not enough. German is considered an advantage.

Norway

In addition to English, French, German and Spanish are taught.

English starts at age 6, while the second foreign language at 14, and this

distance is regarded as a deficit. Namely, the student will reach the advanced level in the first foreign language when s/he starts the second foreign language, which might be demotivating.

Macedonia

In Macedonia, in the previous policies of *primary education*, foreign languages (not English exclusively) were introduced at age 11, while in the reformed system the first foreign language is English and it is introduced at the age of 6, while a more diversified array of foreign languages is offered as a second foreign language.

In *secondary education sector*, following is the list of languages available:

High school

	I	II	III	IV
First foreign language	English, French, Russian	English, French, Russian, German	English, French, Russian, German	English, French, Russian, German
Second foreign language	English, French, Russian, German	French, Russian, German	English, French, Russian, German	English, French, Russian, German

Vocational schools

	I	II	III	IV
First foreign language	English, German, French	English, German, French, Russian	English	English
Second foreign language	English, German, French			

Art schools

	I	II	III	IV
First foreign language	English, French	English, French	English, French	English, French

The above tables imply that continuous availability of foreign languages is taken into consideration, while on the other hand there is still lack of continuity for some languages. This situation might be interpreted as representing a result of insufficient availability of teaching staff, insufficient interest for some foreign languages, the overall policy, including the language policy etc.

Methodology

Among the frequent criticisms regarding foreign language performance (productive skills in particular) is the fact that the years of exposure to foreign language training and the actual performance do not correspond proportionately.

This general finding resulted in criticisms against the pedagogy. Grammar-translation method was derided and communicative method, as well as task-based learning, in particular, were introduced to replace it. However, it is still disputable whether traditional methods (focusing on grammar and translation) are disadvantageous i.e. that the new communicative methods are more efficient.

Today, modernization of foreign language policies imply early exposure of children to foreign language teaching, but to take advantage of the early language learning it is essential that there is a continual contact with the foreign language(s) in question. Having into account the peculiarities of children's language acquisition and especially the difficulty to transfer the acquired knowledge between different contexts, pedagogical continuity should be provided between pre-primary, primary and secondary sectors.

Another contributory factor is motivation, which is not at the same level in the primary and secondary schools, compared with motivation of students in the higher education sector. In fact, students (in the higher education sector) become more aware of the importance of foreign languages.

The idea of synchronization of national policies, including language teaching derives from the Council of Europe. The Treaty of Maastricht has streamlined the educational objectives. Under the macroprogramme Socrates, the Lingua programme of 1990, was aimed at mastery of two or more foreign languages.

Conclusion

The Council of Europe states that "curricula should be in line with the overall objectives of promoting linguistic diversity", though at the same time, "it is not necessary for the objectives or kinds of progression in each of the chosen languages to be the same, if, for example, the educational system allowed pupils to begin learning two languages at a pre-determined stage the starting point need not always be preparation for practical exchanges satisfying the same communicative needs" (Common European Framework 1994:75).

This should be considered in the process of syllabus design for particular languages because it has been identified that wrong decisions can be taken in order to realize the an unnecessary pursuit of the system's uniformity.

Teacher training

Teachers need the following attributes: proficiency in the target language, ability to analyse and describe that language, knowledge of the principles of language acquisition, pedagogical skills specifically adapted for teaching foreign languages to young children.

It should also be insured through joint pre-service training in didactics and methodologies (Hurrell 1995:80).

In addition, smooth transition might be ensured via creating models for primary and secondary teachers' cooperation and circulation of information between primary and secondary schools.

Introduction of the in-service training (especially for skills in new methods) is being considered in some countries as potential mandatory condition to be imposed to the teaching staff.

Social trends nowadays imply that *CLIL* can possibly be regarded as an important perspective of language teachers, while *Bilingual education* is regarded as a requires resources.

Appropriate methodologies for different age groups

Innovation and suitable methods should be developed and used for each age group concerned. It should be an active process and cognitive styles of learners o be considered.

Linguistic diversity

While it is desirable to provide parents or schools with a choice of languages at primary level, this does not guarantee diversity especially if continuity in the chosen language is to be maintained in secondary school. Teachers of less widely used languages may not be easily available at both primary and secondary level. Sometimes It is appropriate to favour foreign languages widely spoken locally or in neighbouring regions.

Regarding the dominance of the English language, the proposals to reduce the dominance of English are as follows:

- That the first foreign language to be introduced in schools should be from the neighbouring country languages;
- That the first foreign language to be introduced in schools should be from the same family of languages as the national one – Roman, German, Slavic.

Despite these proposals and diversified offer of languages, the prevailing tendency was the choice of parents, who again select the most popular languages

Parental involvement

Parents should be involved during the introduction of language learning into a primary school, and the choice of languages to be learnt should be explained to them, especially if those languages are not widely used ones. Parents should have a clear understanding of the objectives, so that they can establish for pupils a supportive atmosphere outside the classroom.

Synchronized and coordinated research

Research into language learning should be effectively coordinated to ensure that all of the relevant aspects are covered. There must be enough flexibility to allow scope for implementing and evaluating alternative solutions to those currently existing. In addition, autonomy of *universities* should not be an impediment for their involvement in the development of language teaching policies. Their input should be used in the policy-making, since Faculties of Languages are those that provide training for the future teaching staff needed at all levels of education – primary, secondary and higher education, in both private and public sectors.

However, all the above components can be accommodated by national systems with a satisfactory degree of educational continuity in general.

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КОНТИНУИТЕТ У ЈЕЗИЧКОМ ОБРАЗОВАЊУ

Сажетак: Рана изложеност страним језицима покреће серију питања у смислу дизајнирања и имплементације језичних политика у различитим земљама. Унутрашња уједначеност образовног система, који обезбеђује континуитет не само у оквиру основног образовања, него и несметани прелаз са основног у средњошколско образовање, као и прелаз са средњошколског на високообразовни сектор. У исто време намеће се важност хармонизације циљева, кохерентна организација и систематски континуитет у смислу искустава учења на свим нивоима образовања, размена информација, дисеминација примера добре праксе, као и подизање свесности за релевантна питања путем програма за стручно усавршавање наставника, успостављање везе између персонала на свим нивоима образовања. Међу често цитираним препорукама у прилог омогућавања континуитета спада и препорука за заједничке обуке кадрова различитих нивоа у вертикали школског система. Постоји увереност да ће овај начин омогућити подељеност увида, материјала и наставне методе. Такође су додатне незаобилазне теме у вези са обезбеђивањем континуитета истраживачки оријентисани програми, активности везане за период планирања и период након имплементације одређеног подухвата, као и укљученост родитеља.

Кључне речи: Уједначеност језичне политике; основно, средње и високо образовање; дисеминација добре праксе; заједничка обука кадрова различитих сектора