

Language policy and language learning in Macedonia

Which lessons may be adopted from the Swiss model?

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Abstract

The following paper will investigate the acquisition of Macedonian languages in public schools and universities, focusing on the Albanian and Macedonian languages. As the saying goes: "The more languages you speak, the more human you are". Abiding by this proverb, the citizens of the Republic of Macedonia should be encouraged to become multilingual by learning the national languages. The acquisition of the national languages in a multilingual, multiethnic and multicultural country like Macedonia is, in my opinion, a necessary step toward the establishment of smooth and peaceful communication between the country's two largest cultural groups (Macedonians and Albanians), and is therefore also a prerequisite for the successful integration of every citizen into their home country's society.

This paper also investigates Switzerland's multilingual and multicultural society, which serves as a successful and positive example of how a nation can deal with a multilingual population and the integration of its population. With this in mind, the question is raised here whether the model of Switzerland's language policy and national language instruction can perhaps also serve as an example for the Republic of Macedonia.

1 Introduction

The main objective of this paper is to gain new insight into the learning of local languages in the Republic of Macedonia, with the emphasis on the education system and the teaching of Macedonian and Albanian in the schools.

The Republic of Macedonia, which is located in southeastern Europe, was admitted under the provisional reference of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia – which resulted from a dispute with Greece about its name. Macedonia as a political entity dates back to 1945, having been one of the former Yugoslav Republics. In 1991, Macedonia declared its independence. In 2001, there was an armed ethnic conflict between the UÇK (Albanian Liberation Army) and the Macedonian security forces. As a result of this conflict, substantial changes have been made to the Constitution, which resulted in the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement. This Agreement was supposed to grant more rights to the ethnic Albanians in the country. However, this Agreement has not been fully implemented, and is often misinterpreted by Macedonian politicians. Since 2005, Macedonia holds the status of a candidate for entry into the European Union. Macedonia is a multilingual country, with Macedonian being spoken by 64% of the total population of approximately 2 million people, and Albanian being spoken by 25% of the population. Besides these two languages, there are other minor languages spoken, such as Turkish, Serbian, Rumanian, Roma, etc.

Language is the main pillar of preserving the identity of a nation. Identity is valued by a nation or an individual as a part of existence. It should be emphasized here that while the choice of a language should be considered as a main part of one's identity, it is also a crucial component

and tool towards the preservation of a group's identity, as well as a protective weapon in possible social conflicts (cf. Kummer 1990, cited in Angeleska 2006: 90). The most important issue for a minority is its use of the language as an instrument to organize public life in a given society (cf. Auburger 1992, cited in Angeleska 2006: 90).

According to John Edwards (1984), school is considered to be one of the most important instruments for fostering ethnic identity, where the majority and minority rules influence each other on social matters. Learning two languages equally, and above all, using them as a means of communication between the minority and majority, is in my opinion a must towards communication without difficulties between the ethnic groups. Bilinguality also encourages the citizens of a given multilingual and multiethnic country towards an efficient education which will create a set of preconditions for successful integration of every citizen in a multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual society such as Macedonia.

2 Language policy in Macedonia

Looking at the language policy in Macedonia, it should be emphasized that its main problem within the internal politics of Macedonia is the lack of legal regulations ensuring the status of the Albanian language as a legitimate mother tongue. This shortcoming affects 25% of the total population of the Republic of Macedonia. The signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which put an end to the armed conflict between the UÇK (Albanian Liberation Army) and the Macedonian armed forces in 2001, led to legal regulations, especially the modification of the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia. The Ohrid Framework Agreement clearly stated that, in addition to the Macedonian language and its Cyrillic letters, the official languages are obliged to include the language of any other ethnicity which makes up more than 20% of the total population of the country. Based on this agreement, the Albanian language and its Latin letters, which is the language of 25% of the total population in the Republic of Macedonia, is an official language of the country. It is obvious that the Macedonian negotiators were careful enough not to include the term "the Albanian language" in the new Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia. Even to this day, the Ohrid Framework Agreement, especially those parts that refer to use of the Albanian language within the country, is not fully implemented. In my opinion, the language policy of the country should regard both the Albanian and Macedonian languages equally. The Swiss language policy could serve as a very good model, as Switzerland is also a multilingual country.

Starting with the education system of the Republic of Macedonia and the overall conditions regarding the learning of foreign languages in the country, I shall focus on the learning of local languages, i. e., on how the Macedonian and Albanian languages, as the main languages used in the country, are taught and learned.

3 The education system in the Republic of Macedonia

The learning of foreign languages in the Republic of Macedonia starts in the first grade, i. e., at the age of 6, when English is introduced to the students as the first foreign language. In the 4th grade, local languages are introduced to the students, with Albanian speakers obliged to learn Macedonian; by contrast, Macedonian speakers are not obligated to learn Albanian. Starting with grade 6, there are two other foreign languages introduced to the students on a compulsory basis. Students are given a choice between German and French. Students study all these languages until they finish their secondary education. In the last 20 years, there is an increased interest in learning German, although according to the official statistics of the Bureau for Development of Education of the Republic of Macedonia, French is still the second most popular language after English. In one way, the statistical data shows that the Republic of Macedonia is actually complying with the recommendations of the European Council regarding the strengthening of a multilingual and multicultural Europe, where each European citizen will

be able to speak at least two foreign languages in addition to his/her native language. On the other hand, the language policy of the Republic of Macedonia is very worrying in that Macedonian students do not learn one of the official languages of the country, Albanian.

What is the situation regarding the learning of a second foreign language or a second local language, Macedonian or Albanian? Keep in mind that Macedonia, as a multilingual and multicultural society since its independence in 1991, imposes on the Albanian children the requirement to learn Macedonian starting with the 4th grade, but the Macedonian educational system does not require the learning of Albanian by Macedonian students. From this, it can be concluded that when the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Macedonia refers to integration into a multiethnic and multilingual society, they solely mean the integration of the Albanian community into Macedonian society. I believe that the current language policy will not result in the successful integration of Macedonian society. Rather, the two largest communities need to be integrated equally into each other, a trend that has worked well in highly civilized and developed countries of Western Europe. At this point I raise the question: How would ethnic Macedonian citizens be integrated in the regions of Western Macedonia with 55% to 80% Albanian native speakers (cities such as Tetovo, Gostivar, Debar, Struga, Kicevo, etc.) when they are not learning the Albanian language? For a better integration of the Macedonian citizens into the regions dominated by an Albanian speaking population, knowledge of the local languages is of crucial importance for a successful multilingual society in the future.

Instead of requiring the teaching of Albanian in elementary and secondary schools for Macedonian students (unlike Albanians who have been obliged to learn Macedonian since 1946), the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Macedonia, in January 2010, asserted that the Albanian children are "privileged" to start learning Macedonian from the 1st grade in addition to their mother tongue. This was done without any psycholinguistic studies, neither didactic nor linguistic analysis, without public debates and without the involvement of experts from the field. The situation becomes even more difficult when students start to study English as a foreign language. The Macedonians, on the other hand, are at an advantage because they only have to learn Macedonian and English. By enacting this policy, the Macedonian politicians make it clear that the Macedonian language should dominate the Albanian language, despite the fact that it is spoken by more than 20% of the total population of the country, and by more than 8 million people in the region. These facts should be seen as motivation for Macedonian children to learn Albanian in order to facilitate better communication between the two ethnicities. We must not forget that the European Council recommends that all its member countries, as well as the EU countries, should learn the languages of their neighbors as often as they can. Citing the mental overload of Albanian children resulting from the decree of the Minister for Education of the Republic of Macedonia (according to which Albanian children should learn Macedonian starting with the 1st grade), the parents of the children boycotted the learning of Macedonian. At the same time, they argued their case at the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Macedonia. A couple of months ago, the Constitutional Court decided in favor of the parents and struck down the law of the Ministry of Education. This supports the fact that overly hasty and politically-motivated decisions are often frivolous, unprofessional, and without any scientific foundation.

Acting as a model of multilingualism for southeastern Europe as a whole is the South East European University in Tetovo. This University was founded in 2001, and in addition to English, the university offers, for the first time, Albanian language courses to the Macedonian speakers and Macedonian courses to Albanian students. This University was founded by the EU and the USA, which both support higher education in the Albanian language.

4 Would Swiss language policy be an appropriate model for the Republic of Macedonia?

In my opinion, at the level of a country as a whole, a very good model for the learning of foreign and local languages in the Republic of Macedonia is the Swiss model. This is due to the fact that Macedonia is a multiethnic, multilingual and multicultural country, just like Switzerland.

In multilingual Switzerland, there are 4 different languages spoken; German by 63.7% of the population, French by 20.4%, Italian by 6.5%, and the Rotoroman dialects by only 0.5%. The Swiss politicians and authorities have intensively discussed the issue of the children's age in learning languages. Is it appropriate to start with English as a first foreign language, or should they start with one of the national languages?

In 2004, the Swiss conference of Cantonal directors came to the decision that, starting from 2010 through 2012 at the latest, elementary school children in all obligatory public schools should learn two of the national foreign languages and one additional foreign language, English. In Central Switzerland where German is spoken, a 3/5 model was decided upon, which requires English to be taught starting from the 3rd grade, with French added from the 5th grade onwards. Up until now, German-speaking Swiss children learned only one foreign language, French.

On the other hand, a group of researchers from the Education University in Central Switzerland in Luzern, lead by the Haenni Hoti (2009), has studied a new model in the framework of the national research program (Nationales Forschungsprogramm), known to the Swiss public as "Multilingualism and the language competences in Switzerland". This study, which examines the learning of the third language, has shown that the new model, including English from the 3rd grade and French from the 5th grade, is more effective than the old model. As such, it does not represent a threat to the children's motivation. This means that the language competences in the first foreign language, English, have a positive effect over the second foreign language, French. In other words, those who have previously studied English will learn French more efficiently. It has become clear that studying these languages in the reverse order would prove to be equally successful, said Haenni Hoti.

Discussions among Swiss parents in many Swiss cantons regarding the introduction of English as a first language before one of the national languages, such as French, are highly controversial. The Western Swiss Cantons – those located on language boundaries as well as Ticino – believe that this approach endangers national cohesion. The Eastern Swiss Cantons, however, argue that this policy is based upon the prospective of market demands as well as the globalization phenomena (see "Die Einführung des Englischen als erste Fremdsprache an Schweizer Schulen: vom Mythos zur Realität" 2009).

5 Conclusion

Swiss language policy towards the learning of foreign languages and/or national ones would be a very suitable model for a multilingual Macedonia. While, in Switzerland, German-speaking children learn French, and French speaking children learn German, in Macedonia, Albanian speaking children learn Macedonian but Macedonian speaking children do not learn Albanian.

In contrast to the Swiss practice of English learning at 3rd grade, starting early English language from the 1st grade has become the practice in Macedonia, and for many reasons cannot be stopped. In addition, the second foreign language, the alternate national one, should begin as it does now with the 4th grade. However, it should not only be offered to the Albanian speaking children, but to the Macedonian as well, just as in the Swiss education system.

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