

NEW FROM TRADITIONAL – INNOVATING FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING ACCORDING TO EXPERIENCE OF TRADITIONAL TEACHING

Aleksandra Gojkov Rajić

Jelena Prtljaga

Učiteljski fakultet, Univerzitet u Beogradu

Visoka škola strukovnih studija za vaspitače „Mihailo Palov“, Vršac

vsvaskatedrasj@hemo.net

Abstract: *Consideration of the foreign language competences of students who have finished secondary school has shown that, in spite of new and, according to the statements of variety of authors, more efficient methods and materials, has shown that there is no expected improvement in the field; instead, that we could even talk about certain deterioration. Such a standpoint has lead to the question referring to the cause of the mentioned condition; the text is an attempt at providing an answer to the raised question. In this sense, new curricula, methods and learning materials have been considered, leading to a conclusion that there has been a shift towards functionalism and practicisim, narrowing the notion of language and boiling it down to its pragmatic layer. Starting from the generally accepted fact that foreign language is best learnt in its natural setting, the authoresses of the paper advocate for bringing more extensive texts back to foreign language teaching as a possibility of creating a natural environment, to an extent similar to the foreign language speaking setting, without expensive travels and disturbing other obligations, through immersing into the world of works written in the language which is learnt.*

Key words: *foreign language teaching, text, innovation*

It is beyond dispute that any education leads to development and progress, as well as that education is an absolute precondition for advancement in any field; however, those dealing with the sphere of education more seriously and reflecting on the issue more deeply make efforts to always again and from new angles consider their own approaches, test them and search for those better and more efficient. When focusing on education leading to development, foreign language has a special place in contemporary conditions, since it is one of the prerequisites of both following and being in step with the events on the world scene and presenting one's own achievements to the rest of the world. In this sense a modern man is expected to have mastered at least one of the world languages, and, according to the modern trends permeating school curricula, even two foreign languages. As a consequence, foreign language teaching methodology is relentlessly searching for new high quality and more efficient methods, procedures, materials and ways of teaching and learning it.

Contemporary expansion of globalization we have all been witnessing has brought to a great "demand" for foreign language competence, which, again, resulted in tireless search for more modern, and even more importantly, more efficient methods of its acquisition. The mentioned broad discussion on the subject has led to the "flood" of modern methods, courses and materials, which supposedly, according to their authors, certainly and as quickly as possible lead to full acquisition of the desired language. Nevertheless, an attempt to consider language competences

of graduated pupils from a neutral perspective has revealed a different picture. A foreign language teacher working at a faculty or a college is in a position to consider and evaluate foreign language knowledge and skills of newly enrolled students each year. Having in mind that university students are in question, i.e. we are talking about a casual selected sample of the most educated layer of young population, a conclusion can be made that the rest of population, apart from the students who have chosen to enrol at studies at philological group, do not have higher level of knowledge in the field. The monitoring of mentioned evaluations have for many years now shown that not only that the announced improvement of competences has not been achieved, but that we could also in a sense talk about a step back.

Such a statement has naturally resulted in raising a question referring to the cause of such condition. In this sense, textbooks, materials and foreign language learning and teaching curricula have been considered and it seems that what has become increasingly evident is the shift to functionalism and practicism. The curricula proscribe that students should master communication in particular situations, like, for example, in a restaurant, post office, finding one's way on the street, in situation typical for holidays, etc, which is then reflected on textbooks consisting of texts with such titles covering these contents, actually representing the models of possible behaviours in given situations while using certain formulations in the language which is being learnt.

Reflections on possible causes of such a shift get us back to previous century, i.e. the period when teaching methodology which actually brought to the present stated had started to appear. What should be certainly mentioned is the Vietnam war when American teachers involved in foreign language teaching methodology had the task to equip within the shortest possible deadline with such competences which will enable them find their place and get involved in basic communication in a foreign language; subsequently a whole new movement started to develop within foreign language teaching methodology surviving even nowadays. The idea permeating the movement is in itself rather good, but such an approach is not satisfactory enough when the intention is to really master a foreign language. It should be born in mind that the movement has arisen out of the courses whose aim was to enable their participants, who otherwise lived with their fellows in their own country communicating in their own mother tongue, were supposed to get trained for managing and getting involved in basic communication in the country they would spend a limited period of time, rather than to actually master the language in question.

The introduction of the mentioned method in foreign language teaching has led to excessive narrowing of the notion of language and reducing it to its pragmatic level, i.e. boiling it down to everyday communication; as a consequence, students are often instructed to acquire the models covered by the textbooks, imitating short dialogues and participating in role-play activities. To be honest, learning in such a way seemingly gives fast results, but it unfortunately does not bring us to acquisition of real language knowledge, since language is indisputably much broader than the formulas offered for imitation. What is easy to notice as one of the main negative consequences of such an approach is the lack of forming of systematic language knowledge, both in the field of grammar and in the field of vocabulary, since it often remains at the surface level and leads to acquisition of the offered forms without deeper dealing with their essence; thus, it might be that numerous possibilities which certainly exist in such tests and exercises actually remain unused, which is especially problematic with older students. Furthermore, there is another problem appearing and it refers to the authenticity of the text foreign language teaching is based on, often neglecting the level of content and serving solely as means of transfer of language forms which are supposed to be learnt and repeated (Jung, 2001).

In this regard and in accordance to modern pedagogic theories insistence was introduced on active use of acquired language knowledge which sometimes became exaggerated and distorted into its opposite. Even though it is a generally accepted fact that passive knowledge is much easier and faster acquired and that it subsequently leads to transformation of this potential stock into active knowledge in actual use, foreign language teaching often insists too much on immediate use of new words and constructions, not leaving enough space and time for the mentioned transformation process from passive to active to occur. For this idea of instant foreign language knowledge to be realized, it is necessary for textbooks to offer as simple texts and forms as possible, so that the students could be able to instantly actively use them, which, even in this case, is not always successful. In such a way students' contact with longer texts in a foreign language they are learning is set back at the very outset, thus preventing creation of a broader base of passive knowledge. The mentioned approach demanding the equality of "input and output" in foreign language teaching and learning has in the meaning time become so disseminated and broadly accepted that in contemporary literature on foreign language teaching it is considered traditional (Jung, 2001); as its alternative, new ideas and suggestions have appeared grounded on the mentioned fact that the receptive effect in the process of foreign language learning is greater and that it will always be so.

Ulrich Gibitz was occupied by a similar problem (Gibitz, <http://www.lernen-wollen.de>, p. 5) and has, in his paper titled *Handlungsorientierte und authentische Textarbeit im Fremdsprachenunterricht* emphasized that the focus of the current rule within foreign language teaching according to which all four language skills should be developed in parallel and simultaneously should, in certain situations when foreign language is learnt abroad, i.e. not in foreign language speaking country, be shifted to more pronounced development of some language skills which will certainly find their application, probably at the expense of others, which may not be used at all. A statement supporting such a thesis offered by the mentioned author is the fact that in the case of 99 percent of students who learn a foreign language in distant countries, longer stay in the country where the language being learnt is spoken as a mother tongue, is nothing more but an illusion, while the very assumption that foreign language learners will actually spend time in such a country permeates the teaching aim referring to equal development of all four language skills. In spite of the fact that such an emphasis on some language skills while at the same time neglecting others is, from the standpoint of foreign language teaching unacceptable, it actually supports the previously stated reflections on giving more space to, so to say, passive skills, especially in the initial phase of learning, in order to, according to subsequent development and advancement, reach a balance between all language skills and competences.

One more issue which is in the grounds of the mentioned development probably are population migrations. In the second half of the 20th century, the so called developed countries faced the challenge referring to large numbers of immigrants, who actually could not speak the language spoken in the country they migrated to; thus, these countries were supposed to train their new citizens to manage and live in new settings, i.e. they were supposed to integrate them in the given societies. As a consequence, a whole range of materials and textbooks appeared intended for foreigners living in a country, i.e. in a certain speaking area; these very textbooks have then, even though they were inadequate, simply introduced into school teaching of a the given language as a foreign one in other countries, as well.

Another problem refers to the fact that two notions have often been equated: learning a foreign language within teaching in another country and learning a language in the language speaking

environment, i.e. in the setting where the language which is being learnt is actually spoken by majority of population. In the meaning time, two terms have been adopted in the literature denoting these two essentially different processes of foreign language learning. So foreign language learning refers to learning a language in another country, while when learning a language in its natural environment is in question, we are talking about foreign language acquisition; the same term refers to acquisition of another language in the case of children born in a given country who, due to the origins of their parents, acquire another language as their mother tongue, but having in mind the situation they are living in, they actually become bilingual speakers of two languages. According to the above, it is clear that these are completely different processes but these terms have still been ambiguously used so that it is not a rare case that the term foreign language acquisition is used for learning in a natural setting and vice versa.

Having in mind the circumstances in which the two processes take place, it is clear that the textbooks designed for acquisition of a language in the setting where the language is actually spoken as a mother tongue by the majority are not adequate for learning in another country, i.e. abroad. Two problems arise when such textbooks and materials are used abroad. Having in mind that they are designed for work with learners in the speaking area of the language, i.e. with people who have found themselves in a new and unfamiliar setting, the textbook aims to provide such learners with the language means to cope with in such a setting. The choice of texts included in these textbooks is also oriented to the same aim, so that what can mostly be found in them refers often to various forms of ads, parts of daily newspaper articles, news, as well as possible practical solutions of administrative problems immigrants might face. Another significant thematic field refers to one's introduction to other people and a description of the country a course participant comes from. It is clear that such topics are not only interesting, but also necessary for newcomers in the language region, but it is also obvious that they are not the best choice for those who learn the language as a foreign language in another country, especially in teaching environment. This is especially true for beginner's levels of foreign language learning, when within the very first lessons the learners face the structures which are grammatically much more demanding than those they are at the given moment able to acquire. For example, in the case of German language teaching, they should at the very beginning learn not only the names of various states, but also the gender of the states in question, so that they could use them with a proper article, or preposition as well as a proper article form in the case the name of the state is in a case; furthermore, they face the names of the representatives of these nations in male and female gender form, followed by their professions which are also in male and female gender form, along with the whole range of terms necessary for describing nothing more but basic personal details. The exercises supporting the texts and serving to reinforce the learnt material, i.e. new words and expressions, are also not adequate for work in rather homogenous group, and this is most often the case in teaching a foreign language out of the speaking region of a given language. Faced with the questions like, for example, *Where are you from? What is your nationality? Where do you live? What do you do for a living?*, most, if not all the students offer the same answer, which leads to boredom and does not bring the class to the desired conversation development, which could be achieved in heterogeneous groups. What should be mentioned here is another difference between the groups that learn a language in the speaking region and those who learn a foreign language in their own country. Those who have found themselves in an unfamiliar language region, faced with the need to manage and solve numerous life problems, like registration in local authorities, finding a place to live, finding a job, opening a bank account, etc, show much greater desire to acquire the terms necessary for them in their everyday lives. On the other hand, learners who learn a foreign language in their own countries rarely want to deal with these problem issues and see them as boring and difficult. Even though they often fulfil the need for authenticity (Edelhoff, 1985) these texts are not

appropriate for teaching a foreign language beyond the space it is spoken in as a mother tongue by majority of population.

A conclusion could be reached accordingly that what is adequate for learning a language within its speaking area is not appropriate for learning the language in a different context, i.e. in the speaking area of another language. Even though in both cases teaching is in question, the circumstances in which teaching are realized differ significantly, both in the view of student groups and in the view of their interests and needs, not to mention the degree they are exposed to the language they learn and intensity of their contact with it. In the speaking area of the language which is being learnt learners are constantly exposed to the language and they are in intense contact with it, regardless of whether they want it or not. The language is always present, permeating their lives even though they are often not aware of it: through various displayed signs, announcements and ads, or through the conversation they have accidentally heard only passing by other people talking in the street or in another setting, through a song played nearby, through other medial contents... This is, of course, an explanation and an answer to the question how it is possible for learners who learn the language in the given language speaking area with the same number of classes at weekly level to learn the language in question much faster, i.e. to master it through the same fond of classes they used to have back home, while it was not the case while they were learning the language in their own countries.

In spite of the fact that the mentioned statement according to which a foreign language is learnt best and fastest in its speaking area is generally accepted and acknowledged, the implications arising out of it are nevertheless often neglected. It seems that insufficient attention is paid to the causes leading to such a context, as well as the possibilities to, in a way artificially, create similar circumstances for learning a foreign language out of its natural speaking area, which would give similar results.

Since the above mentioned reflections have led to a conclusion that in order to ensure better and more efficient foreign language learning its influence on students should be increased, i.e. they should be in more intensified and frequent contact with it, possibilities of making the idea true have been searched for. Having in mind that it is completely clear that such a contact with a language learnt out of its speaking is impossible to provide naturally, we have tried to find the options to create some forms of virtual reality in which contacts with the language would be much greater and more intensified. In this sense modern technology has opened a number of various possibilities, but imposes itself as a rather simple and applicable solution is reading longer texts in a given foreign language. Immersing into the world of a literary work, a reader at the same time dives into the world of the language he/she learns; thus like with the help of a science fiction film device, a reader moves through space and time, not crossing the threshold of one's home. In such a way the mentioned problem of impossibility of a great number of learners to go to or even to spend some longer periods of time in the speaking area of the language they learn is overcome, opening up broad and versatile possibilities for acquisition of a large base of passive knowledge, especially in the field of vocabulary and stylistics. As it has already been pointed out, for many language learners, the ideal way to increase their understanding of verbal, i.e. nonverbal aspects of communication in the country within which that language is spoken - a visit or an extended stay - is simply not possible. For such learners, literary works, such as novels, plays, short stories, etc. open up possibilities to have a glimpse and understand how communication takes place in that country. Even though the world of a novel, play, or short story is an imaginary one, it provides a full and colorful setting in which characters from many social backgrounds can be described. A reader can discover the way the characters in such literary works see the world outside (i.e. their thoughts, feelings, customs, traditions, possessions; what

they buy, believe in, fear, enjoy; how they speak and behave in different settings). This colorfully created world can quickly help a foreign learner to feel for the codes and preoccupations that shape a real society through visual literacy of semiotics. Literature is perhaps best regarded as a complement to other materials used to develop the foreign learner's understanding into the country whose language is being learned.

The above consideration of modern materials for foreign language learning and its comparison with those which used to be used in foreign language classrooms has shown that reading of longer texts, often chosen from the literature of the people whose language is being learnt has completely disappeared from foreign language teaching. Bringing this statement in relation to the noticed decrease of foreign language knowledge level obvious in the case of graduated secondary school students, in spite of all the greater possibilities of modern age, has led us to a conclusion that both traditional and modern models of foreign language teaching should be reconsidered, keeping what has turned out to be good and efficient in both and rejecting what hasn't. In this sense it is suggested to introduce processing of longer texts again in foreign language teaching, as a form of compulsory reading which once existed.

There are other authors who have also pointed to the importance of reading in foreign language teaching (Kost, C. <http://www.forumdeutsch.ca>) and who have noticed the same shortcoming. Negligence of reading is especially pronounced at beginner level, since many consider that beginners do not have sufficient language knowledge in order to read. Another often stated reason is the already mentioned foreign language teaching focus on speaking, i.e. oral communication skills, which was for a long time neglected in the past, so that, in the attempt to establish a balance, as well as the consequences of learning-centred teaching emphasizing learner's activity in contemporary didactics in general, we have gone to the other extreme. Like the former one, such a disharmony is not good, and should be made better and improved.

Just like other activities, dealing with a text also needs a good preparation suggesting (Kost, C. <http://www.forumdeutsch.ca>) differentiation between text contents and text structure. In the case of text structure, i.e. scheme, it can be concluded according to its format, appearance, introductory line and the presence or absence of pictures what kind or what genre of text it is, i.e. whether it is a newspaper article, a novel, a fairy tale or a scientific paper. In order to establish text contents the titles are of help as well as the pictures students use to make assumptions, subsequently looking for general or specific information according to which previously made hypotheses are either confirmed or rejected. In such a way, students are trained to use a variety of possibilities when faced with an unfamiliar text (which, of course, includes new, i.e. unknown words) to decipher its meaning. What could also be used in the same purpose is the activation of prior knowledge on the subject, along with the pictures which are given by the text. Contemporary technical means have created what used to be impossible opportunities for preparation of multi-medial materials driving different intelligence factors thus contributing to better contextualization of text, its easier and better understanding and faster acquisition of language material appearing in the text.

Even though it may at first sight seem less important, dealing with students' prior knowledge on the subject of the text is rather important, since through it both the teacher and the learner become aware of the individual differences, the so called patterns conditioned by personal experience, education, age and many other factors. Prior knowledge can to great extent facilitate (or, make it more difficult, if there is none prior knowledge) understanding of a text and can guide the reader in certain direction, as it has been outlined by a research (Anderson, Reynolds, Schallert & Goetz, 1977) indisputably showing that a group of female music students and a

group of male sport students interpreted a text they were reading in two completely different ways. Such a finding is in close connection with the theory of reception that was established in literature science in 1970s, according to which each reader experiences a literary work in his/her own way, so that a question is raised whether it is possible to talk about a piece of literary work or only about its reception, i.e. the way its readers interpreted and experienced it (Gojkov-Rajić, 2008).

Through reading longer texts learners not only get into a closer and longer contact with the language they learn, but they also get additional knowledge, i.e. information on writing, which also contributes to language learning. Mastering these texts learners also practice reading strategies, making it possible for them to determine content and grammatical meaning according to the context and to understand basic meaning of the text, without checking every unfamiliar word in a dictionary, acquiring at the same time a positive feeling of being dedicated to new texts in a foreign language. Having in mind that the acquisition of these strategies is necessary for foreign language learning, it is good to introduce them and practice them at the very outset of language learning. For this purpose the text in familiar language can be used enriched by new words (<http://www.referendar.de>), whose possible meaning is discussed at class and which sentence by sentence with the help of the mentioned patterns and prior knowledge gradually become understandable for learners, even without introduction of their meanings. Apart from being interesting and fun for students, through such an activity they realize that a text written in a foreign language permeated by unfamiliar words can be understood according to the context, thus breaking fear from the unfamiliar and the unknown and creating in students a sense of security and trust in their own abilities.

A lot has already been discussed and written about text processing within foreign language teaching, since language teaching is, as it has been formulated at teacher forum (<http://www.referendar.de>), whether we like it or not, based on text, so that the professional circles have in the meaning time advocated for the standpoint that working on a text, which sometimes can be boring, should be “sugared” with adequate methods. In this sense the same source offers in detail elaborated example for work on a longer authentic text as early as during beginner’s phase of learning a foreign language, supported by the description of all the steps to be taken, possibilities and suggestions for additional materials for this teaching unit. When talking about understanding of a longer text in foreign language, some authors (Edelhoff, 1985) mention three different types of understanding. Namely, global understanding refers to an attempt to cope with unfamiliar sounds and signs of a language that is being learnt, i.e. an attempt to understand what the text is about. Another type of understanding is called selective understanding during which certain meaningful units are understood. The highest level refers to detailed understanding when certain situations and texts are thoroughly mastered. Even though learners are not able to understand each and every word in longer texts in a foreign language, which is not the aim of the exercise anyway, they, gradually and in time, encountering the similar sometimes unfamiliar words in a variety of texts and in a number of different places in them, start to unintentionally acquire them, doing so with much understanding for different senses of their meanings, since they acquired knowledge naturally, just like children who learn their mother tongue in childhood.

The type of texts to be processed in teaching can be discussed from a number of viewpoints and aspects; however, those texts from the domain of literature written in the language which is learnt deserve significant attention and certain space should certainly be reserved for such texts, which used to be an inevitable part of foreign language teaching, and we could even go so far as to say that they were a base of foreign language teaching and its inevitable part, have nowadays,

as noticed by other authors (Hofmann, 1980; Kraus, 2004.), almost completely disappeared from it. This is often justified by the fact that they are difficult and that students are not trained to cope with them; however such a situation in foreign language teaching and the place of literary texts in it could also be related to high demands imposed on literary texts, i.e. that they should go beyond the frames of interpretation, but that they should incite communication and, if possible, open controversial discussion (Hofmann, H., 1980). Although they may seem nice, such demands in majority of cases turn out to be a utopia and they rather result in counter effects, i.e. in complete elimination of not only literary but also other longer text and their disappearance from foreign language teaching. According to Collie and Slater (1990:3), there are four main reasons which lead a language teacher to use literature in the classroom. These are valuable authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement. In addition to these four main reasons, universality, non-triviality, personal relevance, variety, interest, economy and suggestive power and ambiguity are some other factors requiring the use of literature as a powerful resource in the classroom context. As it has already been mentioned, such texts should certainly once again become a component of foreign language learning, while their contents, volume, difficulty level and the way of processing should be adjusted to the age and prior language knowledge of students. Having in mind that one of the basic didactic principles is that students should be motivated for further and advanced work, but at the same time high demands and difficult tasks should not be imposed on beginner groups and at younger age; as a consequence, a recommendation could be made to get to the satisfactory level of understanding of the text that has been read, so that according to gradual development and increased expectations we could get to the mentioned ideal.

When processing an authentic text from the field of literature written in the language that is being learnt focus should be on its aesthetic aspect (Jung, 2001), rather than, as it is often done, instrumentalize them through their transformation into material for vocabulary enrichment, grammar exercises or view them only as a document of culture, thus bringing into question the very definition of the notion of literature (Leskovec, 2010). Where else can be beauty of a language found but in its acknowledged literature pieces? If we want learners in classrooms to develop inclination and love for a language, we have to bring literature back in the classroom; since, as we all know it takes time to learn – but once love and curiosity for the subject matter is created, an endeavour of foreign language learning becomes easy, pleasant and rewarding. Having in mind the personal involvement it fosters in a reader, literature can actually be precious for language learning process. Once the student starts reading a literary text, he begins to identify with the characters and think about them. He or she is drawn into the text. Understanding the meanings of lexical items or phrases becomes less significant than pursuing the development of the story. The student becomes enthusiastic to find out what happens as events unfold, feeling close to characters and sharing their emotional responses. This can have beneficial effects upon the whole language learning process.

Even though they actually serve to broadening and improvement of all the mentioned skills and knowledge, practice and drill should not be in the forefront when literature is in question, but they should be dealt with in the same way they are processed in literature teaching in general. In other words, what should be done is create for a moment an illusion of mastery of a given language in order to enjoy a piece of art, neglecting for the time being the situation of learning a language and getting closer to being able to immerse in language and its beauty. Even though it may at first sight seem almost impossible, lonely attempts at getting reading and literary texts back into foreign language teaching have shown that it is possible that even at early age only if adequate tests are chosen, like, for example the fairytales of brothers Grim for German language learning (Gojkov-Rajić, 2010) or William Saroyan's works for English language learning and

teaching, which are rather suitable for overcoming the fear of reading texts in original (Jakubovska, 1994.) which is present in majority of students. Thus, possibilities for older ages of students would be endless.

Apart from literary works, other types of texts can also be used in foreign language teaching, like, for example, newspaper articles, passages of professional-research literature, etc, depending on the age and competence level of students. When everyday news are in question, news covering the most significant events in the country the students live in can be used; in such a way familiarity of the situation and students' prior knowledge will certainly make understanding significantly easier.

It is beyond dispute that the modern technical means have opened up a whole range of possibilities for foreign language learning, according to a film, a video clip, a song TV or radio shows and other different audio and multimedia materials, which of course seem much more up to date, more attractive and entertaining to students; however, they seem to have a small shortcoming. In spite of all their mentioned features, they are often more demanding and acquire higher language competence; as such they are more appropriate for work at higher levels of foreign language learning, as opposed to a text which can be at student's disposal as long as the student needs and he/she can get back to it as many times as he/she wants or needs, when he/she wants to check an assumption or remember something from the text.

Finally, a conclusion could be reached that contemporary foreign language learning should certainly once again turn back to traditional teaching in order to consider all the advantages of reading longer texts, which would not be directly "used for" practicing of planned contents, but whose purpose would be to bring in a relaxed atmosphere the students back to the very essence of foreign language learning, its understanding and appreciation. In such a way, the presence of language learnt in a pleasant and relaxed way would be increased, thus facilitating learning, but also encouraging numerous other mentioned aspects.

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