

LEARNING AND TEACHING EFL IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN TETOVO, MACEDONIA: THE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

Blerta Demiri

University of Tetovo, Tetovo, Republic of Macedonia

blerta.ilazi@hotmail.comblerta.demiri@unite.edu.mk

Igballe Miftari

International Balkan University, Skopje, Republic of Macedonia i.miftari@ibu.edu.mk

Arta Bekteshi

University "Mother Teresa", Skopje, Republic of
Macedonia arta.bekteshi@unt.edu.mkartatatika@hotmail.com

Abstract: Learning is currently viewed as an active, creative and interactive process. Language learning as well as learning in general should be described as an interactive, dynamic process, in which new knowledge is most fruitfully acquired when learners are placed in a situation where they can explore sources and resources rather than in a context of mere formal instruction (Ruschof, 2003). Moreover, teachers must realize that learning begins with the learner and they need to be continuously aware of what the students are doing in class so that they can monitor their own success in providing classroom communication activities (Chastain, 1988).

The last twenty years have been characterized by the gradual implementation of EFL learning in secondary schools in Macedonia. Thus, English has become dominant in the education system where different methods and approaches to teaching and learning EFL have been applied by linguists. But, what kind of methods or approaches do teachers use and how effective are they? What do learners think of their own language learning? How can teachers ease learning processes? How do theories influence classroom practice? What should be done in order to improve the flow between theory and practice?

This paper concerns itself with an attempt to investigate these issues.

A questionnaire was distributed to 124 secondary school students in Tetovo, Macedonia, the aim of which was to overview the methods and classroom practices from the learners' point of view. The learners were supposed to express their opinion on various aspects of FL learning and on their competences in the target language.

The findings have revealed that all learning skills are involved in the learning process, yet too little attention is paid to the skill of speaking and listening; the teachers do not use the target language to a reasonable extent; teaching continues to be based on grammar, on correction, on answering questions on texts, on reading texts aloud, rather than using ICT, language games, TV, native speaker in the classroom, role plays, etc.. Although there is a positive atmosphere in the process of reaching the goals, students are not encouraged enough to use the target language. They are focused on textbooks more than on other resources and too little attention is given to raising cultural awareness.

The particular task of this paper is not only to explore the methods and approaches to teaching and learning EFL, but also to consider whether there is a need for change in EFL learning and what kind of innovation ought to be encouraged and implemented in order to achieve a higher level of fruition and better results in the language classroom.

Keywords: Methods and approaches, EFL learning and teaching, skills, intercultural awareness, theory and practice, target language

INTRODUCTION

We are human because we have language, and we have language because we are human. Each of us is a unique, unrepeatable individual and so is our way of using language. Our language helps us to establish our individuality, and it also enables us to become a fully participating member of society and culture (Chastain, 1988:56)

Until the early 1990s, French and Russian were compulsory, the most commonly taught languages in secondary schools in Tetovo, Macedonia. But, in recent years, with implementation of major school reforms, changing in language teaching and learning have emerged and EFL learning has gradually been implemented. Thus, English has become the most dominant language taught in education system as a first foreign language.

Since English has been an international language, a language of media, spoken worldwide, students' interest in learning this language has continually risen. Accordingly, there have been a lot of efforts in order to improve language teaching and learning by introducing new teaching methods, approaches and techniques into secondary school curriculum, and by using innovative teaching and learning resources.

The changes in demand and need for language education are to be found equally in approach and methodology; today's learners require approaches which are more individualized, more efficient and more motivating (Halink,

2003:44). As Halink states, the question of quality is very closely linked to that of motivation. The stronger the motivation, the better the results.

But how motivated are foreign language learners? How do learners acquire the EFL? What kind of methods, techniques, and approaches are used in the learning process? What is the learners' opinion on various aspects of FL learning and what are their competences in the target language? What changes would have they wished in their language learning? Does the school they are studying in organize out-of-school activities? Are intercultural elements in language learning included in class? Are their errors and mistakes corrected and how often does that happen? How do learners try to improve their language skills? What kind of materials and other resources are used in their classroom? To what extent do teachers use the target language?

The questionnaire study presented in this paper is an attempt to investigate these issues.

METHOD

Being aware and believing that the implementation of EFL learning and teaching in secondary schools is of great importance, since English is a language of mass media, a school subject which in the last ten years has been one of the elective exams (as an external exam) from the State Matura Exams, where students' knowledge, skills, and abilities, acquired during the four-year secondary education are tested and evaluated, I decided to conduct a research in order to find answers to the aforementioned questions.

A learner's questionnaire¹⁰⁷ was distributed to 124 secondary school students. The required respondents were fourth-year students, EFL learners from three secondary schools (Gymnasium and two vocational schools in Tetovo, Macedonia).

The questionnaire contains five sets of rating-scale questions where the respondents were expected to rate a particular issue on a scale that ranges between *far too little* – *far too much*, between *one* - *five*, between *hardly ever* - *very often*, *hardly ever* – *almost always*, *never* – *very often*. The questionnaire also contains two dichotomous questions with *yes* or *no*, and an open – ended question where learners were supposed to give their own ideas and suggestions.

The aim of the questionnaire was to overview the methods and classroom practices from the learners' point of view; to express learners' opinion on various aspects of FL learning and their competences in the target language; to see whether there is a need for change in FL learning and teaching; to evaluate the success of the foreign language education from the students' perspective; to introduce innovations that ought to be encouraged and implemented to achieve a higher level of fruition and better results in the language classroom; to give suggestions on how teaching and learning should be improved.

RESULTS

In the first set of questions students were supposed to assess their own competence in the skill areas such as reading, speaking, writing, listening, vocabulary, grammar explanations and exercises, pronunciation, cultural awareness and knowledge, on a scale that ranges between *one* – *five*, where 5 is the best mark, 1 is the lowest mark.

The results (chart 1) show that most of the learners assess themselves as being *very good* at reading giving themselves a grade 4, being *good* at speaking, vocabulary, and listening, giving a grade 3. They grade their grammar knowledge, pronunciation and writing as *sufficient* giving a grade 2. As for the cultural awareness and knowledge, students feel that the level of competence is *sufficient*, giving themselves a grade 2.

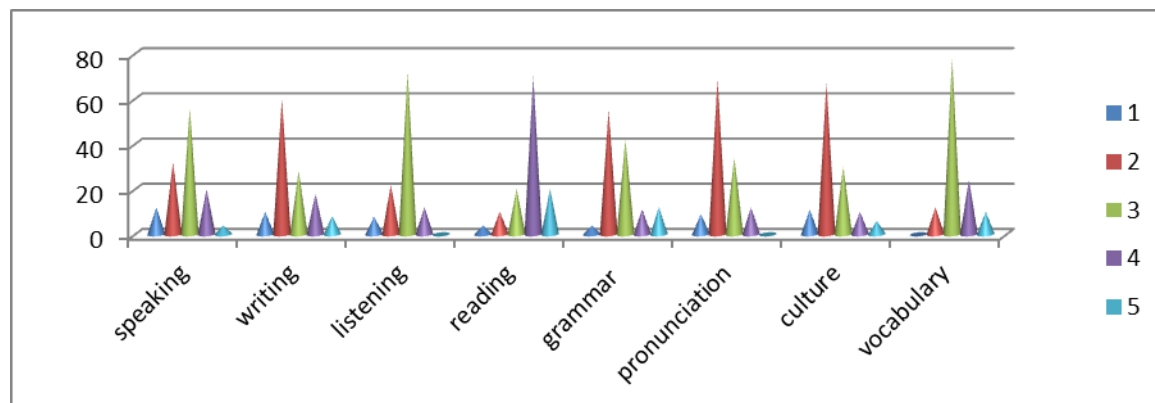


Chart 1

¹⁰⁷ The questionnaire was adapted from a research study conducted by the ECML of the CE in 2003

The second set of questions asked the students to rate the amount of time spent on various aspects of language learning on the scale that ranges from *far too little*, *not enough*, *just right*, *too much* and *far too much*. The analyses of the responses (chart 2) show that *not enough* time is spent on cultural knowledge and awareness. Most of them state that the time spent on vocabulary, pronunciation, and writing is *just right*, whereas about 70 % of them indicate that *too much* time is spent on grammar exercises and reading. Learners are *not* satisfied *enough* with the time spent on speaking and listening, even though they state that they are good at listening skill.

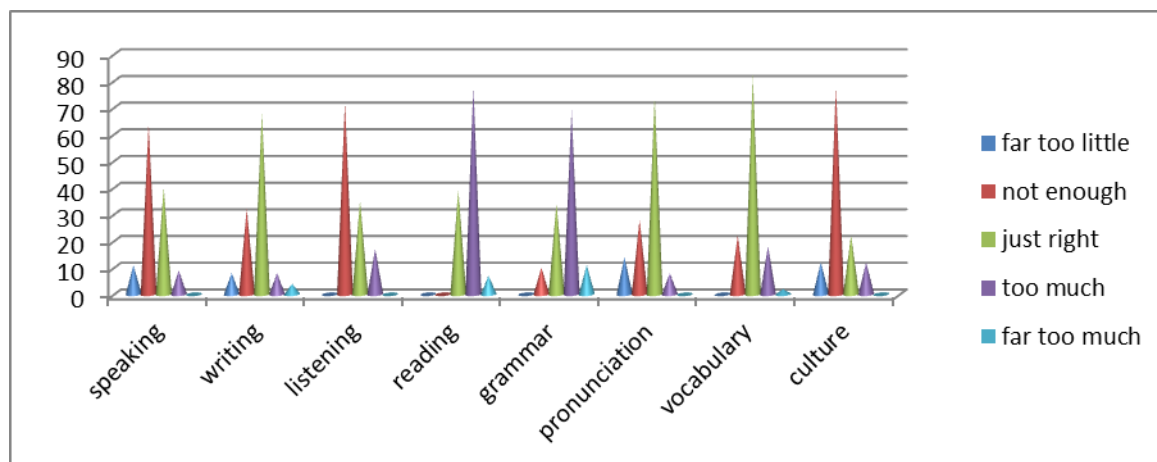


Chart 2

The third set of questions concerned the methods used in the foreign language classroom and how often the activities and exercise types such as explanation and exercises on grammar and vocabulary, dictation, role plays, class discussions, writing, pair/group work, watching videos, listening to CDs, using ICT, using social networks, native speaker in the classroom, reading texts aloud, answering questions on text, reading newspapers / magazines, songs, learning about the culture of the foreign country, translation, games, giving presentations are used in their FL classroom.

The activities were rated on a scale from *hardly ever*, *occasionally*, *sometimes*, *often* to *very often*.

The findings reveal (chart 3) that the most frequently used activities are pair and group work, grammar and vocabulary exercises, reading text aloud, answering questions on text and translating the texts.

The majority of students agree that writing (essays or creative writing) is *often* used in the foreign language classroom, whereas they *sometimes* use the activities such as class discussions, role plays, listening to CDs, using ICT, social networks, dictation, reading newspapers / magazines, giving presentations. The least frequently used activities are songs, learning about the culture of the foreign country, watching videos, games, and native speaker in the classroom.

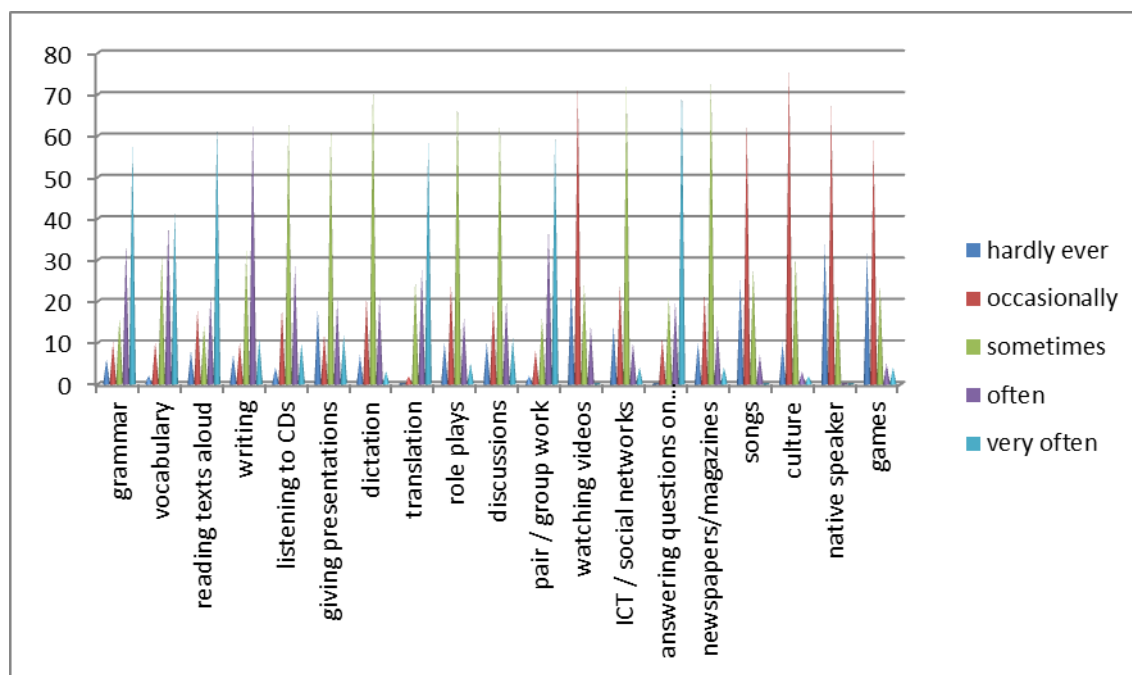


Chart 3

The fourth question was aimed at finding out to what extent the target language is used by teachers in class and how often students are corrected during the FL class.

The rating scale was from *hardly ever*, *occasionally*, *often*, *usually*, to *almost always*.

Most of the students specify that teachers *sometimes* give instructions in their mother tongue but *often* in the foreign language. Only 20% of them state that new words are *usually* or *almost always* explained in English, whereas about 80 % state that they *occasionally* or *hardly ever* use the target language to give the meaning of the new expressions or words. 20% of them say that grammar is *usually* or *almost always* explained in English, 20% agree that it is *often* explained in the target language, while the others say that teachers *usually* use their mother tongue for grammar explanation. 85% of them state that they are *usually* or *almost always* corrected.

Question five was about the evaluation of the materials and other resources the learners use in their EFL classroom.

The rating scale was from *never*, *hardly ever*, *occasionally*, *sometimes*, to *very often*.

According to the answers of the learners, 80 % of them state that textbooks and workbooks are *very often* used during the FL classes; additional materials are *often* used; CDs, Internet, magazines/newspapers, videos, social networks are *sometimes* or *hardly ever* applied in the foreign language classes. They have never had a class in a language laboratory.

They were also asked to assess the materials on a five - point scale, where 1 is the lowest mark, while 5 is the best mark.

The results show that they are more interested in using the Internet, videos and social networks. All of them gave a grade 5 to language laboratory, while textbooks and workbooks are considered less useful materials.

Question six asked learners about the ways they try to improve their language skills outside school. They were asked to answer with *yes* or *no*.

The results reveal that most of the learners (90%) try to improve it by watching TV and videos, by listening to music, or through online social networking.

Some of them (15%) state that they use computer programmes, books, newspapers or magazines to improve their FL skills. 40% of them say they are attending a language school, but only 3 of them have had a holiday in an English speaking country. They have never had an opportunity to travel abroad as part of an exchange program.

Concerning the out-of -school activities organized by the school the learners go to (question 7), they state that the school has not organized any trips abroad or theatre plays in the target language recently. 50% of them say that they have visited the American Corner in Tetovo, and only 15% of them are participating in special EFL school projects.

The last question was an open-ended question where learners were asked to give their ideas, proposals, and suggestions on how to improve and what changes they would wish for in their language learning.

According to the learners, teachers should not be that much focused on textbooks or workbooks, but other resources too. They would like to have less translation tasks, less reading texts aloud, less grammar explanation and exercises.

The new media plays an important role in EFL learning nowadays. Therefore, students want it to be used more frequently in class. Greater emphasis should be placed on listening and speaking skills, class discussions and presentations. Accordingly, they would like more oral skills practice. Almost all of the FL learners want to have their English classes in a language laboratory and a native speaker as a teacher. Students indicate that most of the activities done in class should be directed towards intercultural communication, for intercultural communicative competence is as important as other learning skills. 12% of the learners did not answer the question.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

People who know no language other than their own cannot know their own language either. They still believe that a “foreign” language is something foreign to them. But is there anything on earth that more closely resembles a language than another language? I believe that any teaching of modern languages rests on this fact (Somlyó, 1998:33)

Ruschof (2003) states that language learning as well as learning in general should be described as an interactive, dynamic process, in which new knowledge is most fruitfully acquired when learners are placed in a situation where they can explore sources and resources rather than in a context of mere formal instruction.

The education system in Macedonia has been experiencing a period of transition, where teachers and learners are facing different challenges, and changes need to be done in order to implement innovations, i.e. modern interactive methods, approaches and techniques. Although these new methods and techniques are well-known to the teachers, they avoid applying them, since the traditional methods seem more accessible. As textbooks and workbooks have an intense impact on teaching, teachers should use the ones that help students develop their language skills in order to prepare them for the State Matura Exam.

In order to achieve better results and more satisfaction in the language classroom teachers ought to use the target language while giving instructions or explaining grammar rules. Although grammar instructions might be functional, grammar should not be the focal aim to be reached. He/she must encourage students to use the target language in EFL classes, as well.

Teachers ought to be more focused on the speaking and listening skill, for it is of great importance to listen to and speak the target language as much as possible.

The new words and expressions need to be explained visually, by using TPR approach, or by using the foreign language.

Students should not be corrected, since the feeling of embarrassment when making errors, stop them being active.

ICT, on the other hand, plays a very important role in learning a foreign language as the new media is being incorporated into everyday life. According to Kostelníková (2003:62), the biggest advantage of using the internet for language teaching and learning is that information is easily accessible, that students can work independently, determining their own pace of work, that the internet is easy to handle and that it provides multimedia environment. She states that the internet allows the flexible organization and presentation of tasks. Through online social networking you can download different kinds of teaching and learning activities with just a single mouse click.

The authorities should provide a native speaker as a teacher, so as through their technical assistance students will improve their speaking and listening skill, as well as their pronunciation. Having a native speaker in their classroom, helps students face differences or otherness; develops intercultural communication since raising cultural awareness in the classroom is a very important issue for FL learners.

As the cultural dimension claims stronger presence in language teaching, teachers need to be aware that this is not a question of giving more room to transmission of information about other societies. It is a question of preparing learners for engagement and interaction with people of different social, in particular national identities, and of developing in them an awareness of themselves as social actors in their own society and beyond (Byram, 1998:144)

All these methods, approaches and techniques would be more applicable if each high school had a language laboratory. In a language laboratory not only can they learn the language better, but feel the different environment, as well.

Effective learning cannot develop except in relationship to the person who is learning. Helping the learner is to give him responsibility at the earliest possible stage; it means permitting him to discover a world in many dimensions (linguistic and cultural) from a very early age if possible; it means giving him the intellectual means to develop his skills over the course of his learning. (André, 2003:161)

As claimed by Newby (2003), nowadays, it is usual to see learners not as passive recipients of knowledge, but as active participants in the learning process. This requires, however, greater commitment on their part, and is manifested in processes such as the willingness and opportunity to take greater responsibility for their own learning, to reflect on and optimize learning strategies and to make choices concerning individual learning style preferences. This in turn requires the teacher to focus on aspects such as 'learning to learn', study skills, etc. and generally to guide learners towards attaining a greater degree of autonomy.

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