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Some problems of English Language Teaching in multi-ethnic classes.¹

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First I want to outline the aims of the teaching course that guided me during my first year as a teacher of English. The children were from the age of seven to ten years old:

1. To form in the minds of the pupils a concept of the foreign language as a system of communication that exists separately from their mother tongue – Bulgarian.
2. To teach pronunciation, intonation, right production of the sounds of the new language system.
3. To teach understanding of a numbered selection of structures.
4. To teach vocabulary connected with everyday situations.
5. To teach some facts about the country, the people, the customs in Britain and the USA.

I tried to make available a small classroom for the teaching of English so that the children could go to a special classroom, which they could associate with the language. That meant stepping out of the ordinary routine of school life and getting into a “foreign” atmosphere. And the fact that I taught no other subjects made me more easily identifiable with the English language and the culture. But the economic situation in my country did not allow the realization of this plan.

Pupils had to stay in their classroom and I had to go there and try to provide the English atmosphere. The children were conscious of the fact that they were learning a foreign language and even accepted it as a secret code in order not to be understood by outsiders. But most important of all was that the children should enjoy learning English and their initial enthusiasm should be kept alive.

The classes I faced consisted of pupils from two different ethnic groups – 2 / 3 Bulgarians and 1 / 3 Gypsies, aged seven to ten years old. These two groups can be further divided according to linguistic and social criteria.

According to the first criterion, the linguistic, my class was a representation of bilinguals and monoglots. Broadly speaking, bilingualism is connected with knowledge and use of two languages simultaneously.

The bilingual acquisition can be simultaneous – children are exposed to two languages from birth, and sequential – children who are exposed to one language initially and come into contact with a second language during infancy.

The process of acquisition happens unconsciously unlike the process of second language teaching in school. This natural acquisition of a second language by the Gypsies should be contrasted to the second language learning, which for the Bulgarian pupils will be the learning of English. So, a Gypsy child at about seven

¹ The article is published in:
Holandi, R. (2001): В Езиков свят, бр. 1, ЮЗУ. Благоевград. Стр. 88-89.

should be considered to be bilingual – speaking Gypsy as its mother tongue and Bulgarian, the language used by the majority of people they live with.

On the other hand, bilingualism is an experience that has major consequences for children's intellectual development. Studies have been done that showed that bilingual children performed better than monoglots in tasks requiring high levels of attention.

English learning at school presupposes the building of a third language system separately from the other two for the bilinguals. For the rest of the class, I mean the Bulgarian pupils, the learning of English is the first contact with another language.

Scientists conclude that it would be easier for the bilingual pupils to learn the foreign language than the monoglots would. Learning one language may assist learning another language. Therefore the bilinguals are expected to show higher results in the educational process.

But was that really the situation in my class?

Here comes the second criterion for the division of the class – the social criterion.

The gypsy group of children can be said to be “deprived” or “disadvantaged”, I mean economically depressed, reared in poverty, experiencing discrimination, children who have been isolated from the culture of the majority.

According to the policy of the country for the integration of the minority groups, our school represents a good possibility for integration of the Gypsies in the Bulgarian society.

During the first several weeks I noticed a considerable difference in the process of learning. The Bulgarian pupils were acquiring more successfully than the other group. Then questions started running in my mind. Why was it so? I had to carry a battle on two fields.

First I changed the places of the pupils so that two groups got mixed.

This at least gave them the feeling that they were not separated from the whole. The problem then was how to ensure a balance of knowledge between the two groups.

This gap in academic achievement of the Gypsies can be explained with the atmosphere at home and the communities, which provide inadequate background for school learning. The children are reared in isolated societies, poverty, unemployment, and low rate of education. The houses they live in cannot be said to contain even the minimum equipment – appliances, furniture, etc for the average citizen. Most of the families are unemployed and live on the edge of survival. Usually at an early age the children begin to feel discriminated and when they become pupils they are expected to behave in a certain manner.

McCarthy cites several studies, which show that there is a close connection between the socio-economic status of the family and the child's linguistic development.

Teachers should try to provide the appropriate atmosphere in class. Their words and actions should reassure the children that human beings are equal and that what a Bulgarian child can do a Gypsy child can do too.

The environment can affect the behaviour and the performance of such pupils. For example, the motivation of a child to perform tasks is closely related to the response he receives. If he is not expected to perform well, probably he will not perform well. The poor performance in school may be a result of the negative expectation phenomenon.

I have tried to encourage my pupils in tasks and show them there is nothing they can't do. When a Gypsy pupil enters school, he is considered lacking the skill needed for school success.

The individual differences are also important. There is clear evidence that children, by the age of 9 or 10, do vary in their aptitude for learning a foreign language in the speed and facility with which they can acquire the foreign language. The children at this age demonstrate a considerable variation in language aptitude. For example Dunkel and Pillet in their published report on teaching French in an elementary school in Chicago, say that some 10-20 per cent of the children who show normal or superior progress in most school subjects appear to have a distinct lack of ability in foreign languages. Some scientists have even proposed tests for language aptitude in order to select the group of children. But this is not done nowadays - everybody who wishes to study a foreign language is able to do it.

Motivation in class is another important point in the process of education. The degree of motivation is different for the two groups. The Gypsies have lower rate of motivation than the Bulgarians. So the motivation also has to be improved. For example, children may be given candy upon completion of a task. The teacher can use praise but only when necessary. The use of rewards can also teach motivation.

The deprived child suffers of an emotional and motivational deficit, which decreases his usual intellectual performance to a lower level we would expect.

Thus the higher potentials that the bilinguals have is opposed to social and ethnic differences. Second language learning and the educational process as a whole depend on the social background of the pupils.

I started to teach the Gypsy groups an extra two hours a week, so they had five hours weekly. The Bulgarian group had three hours weekly.

There is another method for obtaining better results in education but it is not always applicable. The teacher could organize a pre-school training course for the parents of such children or a course for the children themselves.

The teacher should constantly be trying to ensure the right atmosphere in class for both groups of children and to use all methods (even to invent new methods) to improve motivation in order to achieve the balance of knowledge. The result will be slow progress but progress.