

Main Trends in Foreign Languages Teacher Education in Latvia and Europe

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Abstract. *In order to determine what improvements are necessary in foreign language teacher education in Latvia, the article describes the evolution of educational approaches in Europe from the end of the 19th century until the last decade the 20th century with a vision for teacher education in the 21st century.*

Keywords: teacher education, foreign languages, teaching methods, education paradigms

Introduction

As Latvia was isolated from other European countries since 1940, the initial teacher education in foreign languages had not gradually gone through all the popular education approaches in the world. After getting the independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Latvia made fast transition to democracy and market economy that brought significant changes in politics, economics and education. It was necessary to transform the 'soviet' model of the higher education and integrate it into the democratic society and knowledge-based market economy of the European Union (EU) that had started the reforms of the higher education in 70s and 80s.

Language teachers often look for what is new, but they very rarely look back, and there is far too much rediscovering of the wheel. Sometimes the teachers lack of historical perspective (Brumfit et al., 1981, p. 35). They often have “collective professional amnesia” and they “live in a capsule of the present moment, with no time for a backward glance” (Maley, 2001, p. 5). The cultural and social developments of the past century often are considered not very important though they affect the way how, why, and in what manner the foreign language is taught and learnt.

At the same time by looking into the past, it is possibly to discover important issues of the future. In order to determine what improvements are necessary in foreign language teacher education in Latvia, the article describes the evolution of foreign language teacher education and educational approaches in Europe from the end of the 19th century until the end of the 20th century with a vision for teacher education in the 21st century. It is analyzed how political and historical circumstances have changed the teacher's identity in the society: from the passive cooperating teachers, following the directions of the program guidelines and procedures, to the active teachers, guides and mediators who promote the learners' involvement.

The experience of other countries can be of value in changing teacher training, particularly foreign language education in Latvia that has started its reforms and the way to outcomes based education only in the middle of 1990s. Based on the main trends in teachers' education in the world, the article analyses the possible ways along which the language teaching profession in Latvia could move ahead in a near future.

Years 1890-1970 in Foreign Languages Teacher Education

In Europe, since the 19th century, the foreign languages teachers' education was determined not only by psychological, linguistic, learning and language theories and availability of pedagogical resources but also by social, economical, political, historical and educational conditions that influenced and changed approaches to language teaching and learning.

In the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, teachers were regarded as special people. They were individuals with particular qualities, ability, knowledge and necessary skills in knowledge scarce environment. They held social status, especially in small communities, and often fulfilled many other community leadership roles, which required the exercise of the knowledge and communicative skills they possessed. Knowledge was seen as authoritative, and in some cases was authorized through mandated curricula. It was also concentrated in the person of the teacher and the site of the school. (Heath, 2001). Teachers did not need to have any special training. They simply had to know how to read, write, and handle children.

The learning of foreign languages was for a long time reserved to privileged social classes but the first teachers of foreign languages had studied a foreign language on their own. The more experience English teachers had learning languages, the more they knew about how to teach learners. Their own experience could tell them about the most effective teaching methods. English teachers who had an experience as language

learners could also better understand the difficulties students face while learning a foreign language. The teachers remembered how they learnt the language and knew what was most difficult for students. (Snow, 2006).

In the first teacher training colleges of the 19th and 20th centuries, the foreign language teachers' education was led through continuous changes in teaching methods and approaches. Though every new method and approach differed from the previous one, it maintained a link with the past by incorporating positive aspects of previous education paradigms.

Anyway, the idea about the teacher who is considered as an authority transmitting knowledge to students who do not know anything remained unchanged in the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th century.

From 1840 until 1940, the foreign languages teaching methodology was based on using the Grammar Translation Method (also the Prussian Method) in Europe. Anyway, there was the following weakness of the method: even after years of learning a foreign language, students were unable to use it for communicative purposes. In the Grammar Translation Method the classrooms were mostly teacher-centred. The emphasis was on vocabulary and grammar, reading and writing were considered more important than speaking and listening (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Even in the 19th century, several educators criticized the method for the cold and lifeless approach to language teaching. The young teachers were trained not to tolerate any errors and be ready for learners' physical punishment. The learners' diligence and intelligence was developed by demanding to memorize long bilingual word lists. The learners had to memorize words and grammar rules for reading the foreign literature, not for speaking (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

The method was quite popular in the Soviet Union, also in Latvia until 1991, when people were not allowed to go outside the country and communicate with foreigners. Sometimes the teachers of Latvia use the method also nowadays: in the situations where the learners need to handle written texts in a foreign language.

In Western Europe, the teaching methods and approaches were developed in opposition to the Grammar Translation Method at the beginning of the 20th century. The time of growing industry world, international trade, and travel demanded real communication skills and more effective language teaching and learning. The necessity to avoid translation in teaching the foreign languages led to growing importance of learners' listening and speaking skills, necessity for meaningful contexts for learning. These principles made the bases for the the Direct Method sometimes called the Natural

or Berlitz Method. The teachers of foreign languages were trained to use the method from 1870 to 1920. The educators also criticized the method and called it “waiter’s English” because of the lack of mental training.

From 1930s to the 60s, the British applied linguists developed the Situational Language Teaching Method for the teachers and learners. The teacher’s task remained unchanged: to lead teacher-centred classes, control the learner and not to tolerate any errors. Not the textbooks but the teacher was the principal source of the information. The learners had to imitate the teacher, train memory and respond quickly and accurately in speech situations.

On the other hand, the method started to stress the learners’ needs. The first time in the history of foreign language pedagogy, teachers of foreign languages faced the need to develop the syllabus, which would be motivating also for learners.

Anyway, the learners were not encouraged to imitate any conversation because of the possible language mistakes also in the Audiolingual Method, which was popular around 1950s, especially in the USA. The method was based on stimulus and response (answer-question) so the teachers did not have to practice communicative exercises in the lesson. The teachers were supposed to prepare a lot of drilling exercises instead, correct the learners’ errors immediately, and be central and active in the classroom. The method needed the tape recorders and language laboratories. The Audiolingual Method mostly involved learning about the language rather than the language itself. As a result, the students were often unable to use the gained skills to real communication outside the classroom.

The method was very popular in Latvia in 70s and 80, when the country was under the Soviet rule. The teachers of foreign languages had to follow the centralized Moscow’s curricula, which determined usage of the Audiolingual Method in the language laboratories. The Soviet education system did not need real communication in foreign environment therefore the educators were recommended to use also the Grammar–Translation method as an addition to the Audiolingual Method. The teachers had very limited possibilities to decide about other approaches in teaching foreign languages. They continued teacher-centred and knowledge based (input-focused) approach: the how (grammar) to say what (vocabulary). The learners had to pursue a level of grammatical correctness in the speech and mostly listen to teacher’s instructions. As a result, the pupils learnt foreign languages passively, according to a teacher's tasks and instructions.

The people who studied at schools and universities in the Soviet times (1960s-1990s), note the weakest knowledge of foreign languages. According to the survey of the

social research firm Data Serviss in collaboration with the State Language Agency of Latvia in 2005, only 2, 4% of 36-45 year old people of Latvia can speak in a foreign language (Āboliņš, 2006).

Years 1970s-2000s: Post-Method Era in Foreign Languages Teacher Education

In the Soviet times, the beginning teachers of foreign languages in Latvia had a lot of theoretical linguistic knowledge, but little idea how to integrate it with practical classroom pedagogy. For example, they knew a lot about the phonology of English, but had no idea about how to teach pronunciation (Urr, 1986).

Before 1990, the usual qualification for foreign language teachers in Eastern Europe, also in Latvia, was a five-year philology degree providing trainees with thorough linguistic and literary knowledge. The traditional model of university-based teacher training in many Eastern European countries was characterised as a strong applied science model. According to this model, theory was the foundation of the training programme. The language teachers were taught to rely mainly on linguistics as a basis for teaching. Most of their theoretical courses and reading was based on linguistic subjects; relatively little on pedagogy or education as such. (Heyworth, 2003). The teaching practice was short: two or three weeks.

At the same time the educators of Western Europe had realized that theoretical knowledge of pedagogy did not ensure that teachers would know how to handle real problems with real learners. Teaching thorough linguistic, drilling, memorization had not resulted in a language competence.

In 1970s, there started widening of the European Common Market that led to the necessity to teach adults the major languages of the European Union (EU). The Council of Europe, a regional organization for cultural and educational cooperation, sponsored international conferences and published the books on language teaching. The educators focused pedagogical attention on the importance of having real, meaningful communicative exercises in the lessons and stressed the importance of teaching the real-world language: a sentence must not only be grammatically correct; it must also be related to the context in which it is used.

The educators faced a paradigm change in language teaching. Before 1970s, the language teaching focused mainly on linguistic goals. Communicative and cultural elements in teaching foreign languages tended to be weak. In the new paradigm of 70s, the language teachers of Western Europe had to teach not only language and a single linguistic knowledge but also non-language-related aspects, for example, how to behave

and what to do in different national and international contexts. The language teachers had to teach foreign languages as a means of communication.

The new mode of teaching foreign languages had strong cultural element and included strong intercultural awareness. It became clear that teaching foreign languages was different from other subject areas. (Heyworth, 2003). Anyway, there were no clear methodological guidelines or methodologies for incorporating the new ideas about the real world tasks in foreign language teacher education. The road from the pattern and drill and towards communication in the language led to the crisis in foreign language teaching system in Europe.

In 1970s, there started the period of innovation and experimentation, called Post Method Era. Before 1970s, the West European teacher was a conduit of the knowledge, doer, and implementer of other people's ideas about curriculum, methodology, and students learning. In 1970s-80s, the teacher became the facilitator and guide as learners construct their own knowledge. Teachers assisted the learners and learnt to acquire student-centred classroom management skills, to monitor and encourage the language learners' needs.

Around 1980s, the term "teacher education" became more popular than the previous one "teacher training". Teachers' mission was not only to teach but rather to educate. The role of the language teacher might therefore be better described as that of the language educator. The changes grew out of shifts in pedagogical approaches in society.

The changing teacher's role changed also the learner's role in all the education process. The education curricula became more learner-centered and focused on the outcomes or outputs of learning in the development of study programs. The foreign language teaching methodology courses included several new alternative method proposals like Audiolingualism, Counseling-Learning, Situational Language Teaching, the Silent Way, Suggestopedia and Total Physical Response etc. In teacher education, the study process was not based on teaching just one method as it was before 1970s. As a result, the student teachers were taught to choose between several methods and approaches when teaching foreign languages.

The changes in teacher education and investigations of the new alternative methods led to several new approaches in language teaching named Cooperative Learning, Multiple Intelligence, Neurolinguistic Programming, Whole Language Communicative Language Teaching, Content Based Teaching, Outcomes/Competency Based Teaching etc. (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

New Approaches in Foreign Language Teachers' Education

In the last decade of the 20th century, the most popular approaches in foreign language methodology courses were Communicative, Content Based Teaching and Outcomes Based Teaching approaches.

Western educators started to emphasize the necessity for the new Communicative-Approach in language teaching and foreign languages teacher education curriculum in 70s. The beginning teachers were supposed to practice the activities that involve meaningful learning and language use in real world applications that demand the communicative competences for speaking to people in different countries; greater attention was paid to individual learner. The educators and researchers saw the need to focus on language teaching on communicative proficiency rather than on mere mastery of structures.

Modern Europe faced linguistic and cultural diversity and exchanges between languages and cultures. It was very important to successfully interact with people with other languages and cultures. The task of the language teachers was to make languages a means of open communication, and provide access to people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. (Heyworth, 2003).

The teachers of foreign languages were educated to use the communicative language programs and textbooks (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The communicative approach was further promoted not only by textbook writers but also by language teaching specialists, curriculum development centers and governments.

Since mid 1970s, the scope of Communicative Language Teaching expanded making the Western educators analyze the teacher and learner's role in education. In comparison to previous methods and approaches, the Communicative Language Teaching accepted learners' errors as a part of language learning. The teachers could not lead the oral communication; they assisted the learner and they did not know what language the learner would use.

First in the history of foreign teachers' education, learners' mistakes were seen as a normal phenomenon in the communicative process. The beginning teachers were taught not to interrupt the speaker and encourage the learners' individuality and creativity (Williams & Burden, 1997). By talking to others in a foreign language, the learner opened himself to the other cultural realities and subjects, particularly to those which are about communication or international contacts. Foreign language was not a pure academic subject any more. Language teachers were not considered only language

teachers. They had to teach not only language but also non-language-related aspects: ICT, Business studies, Tourism, etc. In the real world, people learn language and content simultaneously so teachers needed to be able to address both within their classrooms. (Crandall, 1994).

Beginning language teachers felt difficulties in teaching both language and content. They were unprepared to integrate authentic texts, tasks, or tests from content areas in their English classes. In order to solve the problem, the teacher education institutions started to implement one more approach in foreign language pedagogy the *Content Based Teaching Approach* in the early 1990s. It was also called integrated cross-disciplinary approach in the foreign language teachers' methodology course. When speaking about the integrated approach to teaching and learning, the American educators used the term "content based second language instruction" or "language enriched content instruction" (Snow, Met & Genesee, 1989).

In Europe, the integrated approach was defined also as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in 1994 by University of Jyvaskyla. The Finnish educators described the educational method where subjects are taught in a foreign language through the learning of content and a foreign language in tandem. The term stressed neither language nor content but saw both as equally important. CLIL was the term used for any subject that is taught through the medium of the language other than the mother tongue, for example, history through German, geography through French, citizenship through Spanish, economics through English.

The Content Based Teaching Approach is based on making meaningful real life situations in the foreign language. Content-based instruction emphasizes a connection to real life, real world skills. In content based classes the teachers were educated to teach, for example, intercultural relations, immigration, multiculturalism or other global issues and easily provide students with the opportunity of learning about the world realities while advancing their language proficiency.

The approach was implemented in West European teacher education curricula in 90s. There had been some criticism about the possibility to implement CLIL based approach in foreign languages teacher education programs. The traditional curriculum supposes that language teachers have been trained to teach language as a skill rather than to teach a content subject. Because of the former traditional approach, the student teachers may be insufficiently prepared to teach subject matter in which they have not been trained (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). As a result, team –teaching proposals

involving language teachers and subject teachers often are ineffective and boring for both the sides.

In the end of 1980s and 1990s, the language teachers' education in Europe faced one more approach named *Outcomes or Competency Based Language Teaching*. Outcomes Based Language Teaching was an application of the principles of Outcomes Based Education movement in general education to language teaching. The focus what students know about language was changed to the focus what they can do with the language: what learning outcomes the teachers can develop.

Learning outcomes are statements of what is expected that a student will be able to do as a result of a learning activity. The outcomes were called "expectations and learning goals, standards, concepts, performance expectations, and performance based education, objectives, learner processes, learner competences (Cramer, 1994).

Floyd Boschee and Mark Baron described the outcomes as learner-centered, future oriented, publicly defined, focused on life skills and contexts (Boschee and Baron, 1994). The educators use the term "learning outcomes" to indicate what a learner is expected to know, understand and /or be able to demonstrate at the end of a period of learning, i. e., the knowledge, skills and abilities named also "competences".

The educators often use the term "learning outcomes" when meaning learners' competences. In general, competence means aptitude, proficiency, capability, skills, and understanding. A competent person is someone with sufficient skills, knowledge, and capabilities (Stephen, 2004). Competencies describe the student's ability to apply basic and other skills in situations that are commonly encountered in everyday life. Competences are described by the words the student "knows", "demonstrates ability", "explains", "identifies" according to Bloom's educational objective levels of knowledge. (Bloom, 1954).

The necessity for outcomes and competencies appeared while building the transparent higher education system in European Higher Education Area in 90s. It was necessary to enable international transparency, international recognition of qualifications and international mobility of learners and graduates. (Schleicher, 2006). The sending and accepting higher education institutions had to find the solutions how to compare the study programs. Learning outcomes became important tools in clarifying the learning results not only for the students but also for the professors and employers. The shift from an education mainly focusing on the inputs, teacher centred and content based gave way to output, student-centred and competence based learning, first in isolated cases.

Application of Learning Outcomes Approach in International Projects and Documents

In order to improve the recognition, transparency, transfer, and recognition of qualifications and competences in higher education areas, around 2000, there were developed several meaningful documents and projects in Europe: for example, a Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, Tuning Educational Structures in Europe, the Bologna Qualifications Framework (BQF) and European Qualifications Framework (EQF) , etc.

Common European Higher Education Area facilitated discussions also in foreign languages student teachers education about transparency and coherence in language teaching and learning and common criteria for a description of language competencies.

Between 1989 and 1996, a number of leading applied linguists and pedagogical specialists from the 41 member states of the Council of Europe were involved in the research “Language Learning for European Citizenship”. As the main part of the project, there was developed the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, or CEFR. The framework was a guideline used to describe achievements of learners of foreign languages across all Europe. The learners’ outcomes were evaluated in an internationally comparable manner. (A Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, 2001).

The trend to output, student-centred and competence based learning was especially stressed in the project “Tuning Educational Structures in Europe” (2000-2004), which was a collective work on learning outcomes as stages in competence-based learning. About 100 European universities decided to accept the ‘Bologna challenge’ and developed a common and modern methodology to support a complete renovation of education programmes. The project developed professional profiles and comparable and compatible learning outcomes and facilitated graduates’ employability by promoting transparency in educational structures (easily readable and comparable degrees or “tuned” study structures). (Tuning Educational Structures, 2004).

In order to provide international transparency, cooperation, transferability, international recognition of qualifications and mobility of learners and graduates in a common European Higher Education Area (EHEA), there was adopted the Bologna Qualifications Framework in 2005. It was based on the first, second and third cycles identified in the Bologna Process. The framework supported the development and recognition of joint degrees from more than one country.

Parallel to BQF there was developed also the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) in 2005. The EQF contains 8 levels and relates to all education and training awards in Europe. “The core element of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is a set of eight reference levels describing what a learner knows, understands and is able to do - their 'learning outcomes' - regardless of the system where a particular qualification was acquired. The EQF reference levels therefore shift the focus away from the traditional approach, which emphasises learning inputs (length of a learning experience, type of institution).” (The European Qualifications Framework, 2007).

Both the frameworks promote the European and international students', also future teachers' mobility, when they try to move from one country to another to learn or work, or build upon previous education or training. They increase mobility for learning or working. The frameworks could prove important for the assessment and recognition of immigrants also from outside the EU.

The competences that could be included in the foreign languages teacher curriculum of the 21st century were investigated in the document named “European Profile for Language Teacher Education in the 21st century.” The document was prepared by a wide range of European experts on language teacher education, and used the experience of eleven European teacher education institutions. The teacher educators were asked how language teacher education could be improved from national and European perspectives. The Profile dealt with the structure of educational courses, the diversity of teaching and learning strategies, the knowledge, and understanding central to foreign language teaching, and the skills and values language teachers should encourage and promote in the 21st century (Kelly and Grenfeld, 2004).

In 1990s and 2000s, there were developed a lot of documents about learning outcomes and competences. However, relatively few European countries or higher education institutions had implemented learning outcomes in a systematic way like, for example, Denmark, Ireland, Sweden, UK etc. (Stephen, 2004).

Learning Outcomes and Competences in Latvia

There is some evidence of the development of learning outcomes approaches in Latvia. The documents ‘Regulation on the standards for academic education’ and ‘Regulation on the standard of professional higher education’ both include an important role for the notion of learning outcomes. (Stephen, 2004). At the time when implementing the Outcomes Based Education was occurring in Western Europe, Latvia was undergoing major political and economic changes. During the last 17 years, Latvia has made a rapid progress in its effort to

leave behind its Soviet past and join modern democratic market economy. New methods of accreditation, compatible systems of course credits, common undergraduate and postgraduate structures and degrees for all European Union countries have been invented. However, in many teacher education institutions the focus is on the content and process of education.

The first attempts to change the existing knowledge based approach to outcomes and competency based approach appeared in some higher education institutions only around 2005. For example, the Faculty of Pedagogy at the University of Latvia had started to develop the foreign languages teacher education study programs according to the principles of outcomes based education that firstly demands identifying the expected results, determining acceptable evidence, and only secondly planning instructions and assessment. Other higher education institutions of Latvia mostly have not started implementing the new outcomes based approach in their teacher education study programs.

The slow shift to learning outcomes can be explained by historical and political reasons. In Latvia, the education reform started in the early 1990s, after gaining its independence from the Soviet Union. When Latvia achieved independence, it moved to a decentralized system and developed “knowledge” standards. At the same time, educational institutions in Western Europe were embracing outcomes based educational standards that also included requirements for the teaching not only knowledge but also skills and values.

The competencies were not required in the Soviet times, they are not particularly stressed in the General Teacher’s Standard of Latvia therefore many professors and lecturers do not implement them in their teaching nowadays. Slow shift to learning outcomes makes the teacher education programs rather theoretical, content-oriented and even authoritarian. (Geske, Grīnfelds, Kangro, Zaķis, 2003; Seile, 2003).

There is a possibility that the young graduating teachers will continue the same traditional input orientated approach in their own classes if they have experienced mostly the traditional instructions and traditional assessments instead of performance-based instructions and assessments.

It is necessary to develop the new standards for the teachers of the foreign languages stressing not only the knowledge but also skills and values. The development of the standards would mark an important shift from an input based view of language instruction-focused on the information and knowledge students learn in a curriculum, to an output based view centred on what students should know and be able to do as a result of language study. The language teachers’ educational system of Latvia should move to a split of knowledge, skills, and values.

However, Western Europe had about 30 years for implementing the learning outcomes and learner-centered approach in foreign language teacher education. Latvia, as a post Soviet country, has to renew the teacher education system much faster if it wants to become a competitive partner in the new world of the 21st century.

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