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Student perceptions of the educational reform in foreign language instruction: A critical ethnography

This study explores the relationships between students' beliefs about second language instruction and their perceptions of their instructional practices. Consequently, the research methodology focuses on the existential experiences of the participants' themselves, that is, their perceptions, actions, thoughts, and feelings about their experiences during the instruction.

The qualitative data from the student interviews suggest that students are particularly docile at the beginning of their academic career since they do not question the acculturated norms. However, if they are exposed to a different model of instruction, they do not automatically reject it, which supports that students primarily value activities for their effectiveness and enjoyment. Unfortunately, the students in this study have rarely been exposed to an empowering and engaging instruction which augments their revolt and frustration as they progress through university education. Instead of being main actors in their tertiary-level enterprise, the students only undergo their education. They take on their passive role which is presented to them through the overall cultural model of education. It happens that students question the system, but most still do not really take an active role in their learning experience. Within the framework of affective learning, this implies that the responsibility of educators and policy makers transcends the traditional transmission of knowledge to include facilitation of autonomous learning.

Serbia is currently going through a series of educational transformations which, in the case of second language instruction, involves a complete reform of the language curriculum in line with the current theories of second language learning and specific documents of the Council of Europe. This entails the substitution of previously dominant methodologies with an emphasis on grammar instruction by the communicative approach whose objective is an achievement of bilingual/plurilingual and bicultural/pluricultural proficiency. Not only is this change important for foreign and second language education in Serbia, but it also reflects a shift in the overall cultural and academic climate in Serbia.

However, there is a question as to how students accept these curricular changes and whether they perceive its goals as positive and realistic. This study represents a part of a larger project conducted at the Department of Iberian Studies at the University of Belgrade in Serbia. In order to explore the relationships between students' beliefs about second language instruction and their perceptions of their instructional practices I engaged in a 16-months long qualitative research. In the rest of this paper, I present some of the main concerns related to student perceptions of their language instruction and I discuss these themes within the socio-cultural context of Serbian education. Importantly,

many of these questions reflect the issues of power relations in the classroom and the possibility for autonomous learning at the university setting.

Tradition and innovation

The new language curriculum introduced at the Department of Iberian Studies at the University of Belgrade as of the academic year 2006-2007 incorporates the principles of the current approaches to language instruction (see Savignon 1997; Doughty and Williams 1998; Swain 2000; Council of Europe 2001). The goal of the new language instruction as proposed at the Department is, thus, to enable students to use the target language successfully and adequately in a number of language domains. At the same time, the Declaration of Bologna (1999) and the related documents suggest that the instruction be organized in a way that would promote the greater mobility of students, learner centered education, and teaching curricula defined in terms of outcomes, among other things.

Conceived in such a way, the promotion of learner autonomy appears among the goals of the new educational policies, even though it is not explicitly stated. However, this new approach to education with a significant modification of the traditional teacher and student roles strongly challenges the dominant cultural model of education in Serbia. The university education has traditionally imposed a passive role on students, that of a listener and an acceptor of the imposed obligations. The teacher, on the other hand, represents a crucial part of the learning process, since it is the teacher who introduces all the new material, who explains it and who monitors students' progress. Additionally, the traditional and novel approaches to university education hold opposing attitudes toward learning in general. While traditionally learning has been seen as an individualistic action that demands a purely intellectual and studious dedication from part of the student, the new approach introduces the element of enjoyment and playfulness into the language instruction. It requires a more active role of the learner and more flexibility on the part of the teacher. Thus, while there has been a set distance between teachers and students in the traditional classroom, the crucial innovation of the new approach is a lack of such detachment. The learning is not perceived as exclusively intellectual endeavor; rather it engages both intellectual and affective capacities of an individual. This is in line with the affective teaching approach according to which learning involves the whole person, that is, a person's physiological, intellectual, and affective reality (Arnold 1999).

The dominant learning metaphor in the traditional approach is clearly that of a container where students receive the knowledge from their older educated colleagues whose obligation is to transmit this knowledge to students and to evaluate how well they can reproduce it (see Lakoff and Johnson 2003). However, individuals are not entities separate from the rest of the world as this metaphor would suggest. Instead, we create our knowledge through interaction with other individuals, teachers and peers in this case. This implies that language students do not come to the university as empty vessels ready to be filled with the new knowledge. They already possess previous conceptions and beliefs about the language and appropriate ways on how to approach language learning which will influence their attitudes and perceptions of the new learning context.

Consequently, the research methodology in this project focused on the existential experiences of the participants' themselves, that is, their perceptions, actions, thoughts, and feelings about their experiences during the instruction. Mainly four sources of data were used during this period (March 2007 until June 2008): class observations, interviews, field notes, and teaching materials. At the time of data analysis, I followed variable-oriented strategy, that is, I coded the interview transcripts without imposing any previously established criteria. In this way I identified a number of common themes across different years of the study program. For the purpose of this presentation, I will briefly discuss students' perceptions of the goals of language instruction, importance of active engagement and enjoyment in the learning process, and the power relationships in the classroom.

Goals of language instruction

As far as the goals of the language learning program, there seems to be a large discrepancy in what students expect from their language education and what they actually perceive as being attainable. This disagreement is gradually enlarged as students progress through their university education.

In the very beginning of their academic studies, students do not have a very clear vision of what they should be able to do with the Spanish language after their graduation. Most freshmen have a vague idea that they should be able to communicate in a near native-like fashion. This entails that they should also be competent enough to initiate their professional engagement right after they get a degree. In addition, students also expect to get a substantial knowledge in the area of Spanish linguistics, literature, and culture since they are at the university. Linguistic knowledge and an understanding of the target language culture is what differentiates them from people who attend a regular Spanish language course. The positive attitude encountered in freshman students is probably conditioned by their positive perception of their achievement in the first year of the study program. On the other hand, older students tend to narrow down their expectations to just being able to communicate: "When I get a degree, I think I should be able to teach, and I should be able to translate, but I don't know if that will really happen." (Maya, junior).¹ This skeptical attitude may be influenced by dissatisfaction with personal improvement, by negative perceptions of the teaching approach, or by incongruence between curricular and personal goals.

The older students, juniors in particular, tended to emphasize the importance of personal engagement in the learning process. "Much depends on a person, on your attitude toward the subject matter. If you rely on what they expect from you, you can frequently get away with little effort" (Sandra, junior). Thus, a person needs to set their own goals if they want to be able to communicate. Otherwise, they may just wait to finish with the university education so they can really start to learn the language: "I know for myself, as soon as I graduate I will sign up for a private language course" (Helga, junior);

¹ All the names in this study are pseudonyms.

“My wish is to graduate and to go to Spain. There, (...) I will start to speak” (Mara, junior).

The perception of incongruence between one’s personal goal and curricular goals leads students to a conformist attitude. “It seems to me that all they’re doing is to bombard us with some facts, some necessary facts that you need to learn. Whether they’re really important, that’s another issue... And it’s not about understanding them. In fact, you understand what you need to understand because you’ll learn them for an exam and you’ll forget them. It’s so sad.” (Elizabeth, sophomore). The students appropriate the goals imposed from above because they must accommodate to the pre-established norms. “We don’t set rules. They set the borders.” (Sandra, junior). The skillfulness in this process of adjustment is to a large extent a good prediction of a student’s academic success.

Active engagement in the learning process

The teaching approach is strongly influenced by the personal teaching style of every instructor. Since the students in this research attended Spanish language class with two different lecturers, their perceptions of the teaching approach were necessarily different. However, they all tended to emphasize several main attributes of a desirable teaching approach: an active engagement in the class, good explanation, novelty, playfulness, and attention to students’ needs and interests.

Generally speaking, freshmen students were delighted with their Spanish language class. They appreciated this course mainly for three reasons: they felt engaged, they could see the applicability of their knowledge, and they enjoyed the learning process. “I like it with [our teacher] because there is a non-stop activity; it is not about sitting, listening, and taking notes; we do things, we participate, we try to speak on our own” (Roxanna, freshman). This student refers to an active engagement in the learning process. The students in this class do not feel like empty vessels which must be filled with another’s knowledge. The knowledge is created through their own action and through interaction with the teacher and other classmates. It calls for an effort on the part of the student as well which makes them more autonomous learners.

Enjoying the learning process

An additional aspect highly appreciated by these freshman students was an intrinsic enjoyment in the class itself. “We work in a fun way, but we actually learn” (Melany, freshman). However, there is a fear that something really important is missing from this class since it is all too easy. Several students expressed their concern with the fact that the Spanish language course was easier than they had expected. An exceptional example of the clash between the expectations about proper education and positive perceptions of the new approach is evidenced in the following passage:

“It’s all well explained to us and in an appealing manner, so it’s, I don’t know... Again, since it’s a university, all these little photos don’t seem serious. But since

we're in the first year of the study program, and we're learning little by little, I think it's ok. But again, for the next year some activities should change, I guess. Not [our teacher], the way he talks, but simply some activities should be more serious so we engage more, so we think more... I don't want to say we should suffer, but something like that. It should be hard so we can learn better. Probably it needs to be harder so we can learn better." (Melany, freshman).

It is as if Melany had an internal dialogue with herself: she likes the teaching approach, she enjoys it, but she is apprehensive as if there were something crucial being kept out of her reach. Her ambivalence is understandable since this one experience collides with all that she has previously internalized. Overall experience with language learning is crucial in determining students' attitudes about language instruction. Thus, students may enjoy a language teaching approach, they may even be aware of their improvement, but they still believe that more traditional methods should find their place within the language class. Students are confronted with a new way of learning and they need time to adapt. This position was well articulated by a freshman: "Since your first grade you conform to a pattern of learning and now you need to adapt to a different one. Because you know that before you were doing something everyone told you it was important. And now there isn't such a thing. And you miss it. You don't know how to overcome that part..." (Annabelle, freshman). Again a shadow of childishness and appropriateness for the university setting obscures the overall learning experience. Thus, several students explain how they feel foolish when engaged in some communicative games (Carrie, freshman, Annemarie, sophomore).

However, not all students share this opinion. When I asked if games are appropriate for university setting, Carol replied with a question "Is every game easy?". Then she amplified: "The important thing is what you put into the game. A game is only a form interesting for its own sake; then again, it doesn't always have to be interesting. It depends on the people involved and on teacher who manages everything. (...) Now, since we're talking about a university, a serious institution, professors should wear ties, I think we're over that. There's no point in that. Perhaps mentally we haven't [overcome that attitude], but I think it's the last moment to change that. Especially in the School of Philology things shouldn't work that way. We don't get a good result, that's the only reason." (Carol, junior). Carol got to the center of the problem with her critique of the spiteful view of playful learning. She points to the incorrect equation between enjoyment and superficiality held by traditionalists and she claims that enjoyable learning is not necessarily without positive results. In fact, she goes one step further to question the arrogant attitude of seriousness which did not prove to be very successful in the language teaching enterprise.

Power relationships

"Knowledge is power" was said a long time ago. Although much could be added to this quote, it is still alive in the spirit of traditional educational system of Serbia. If students are to be kept powerless, they should be denied access to information. It is not surprising then that students' expectations also address this aspect of the teacher-student

relationship. Students believe that teachers should not only teach the subject matter but also teach students how to learn and where to look for relevant information. "As long as learners know that information will be accessible when needed and that it will be transparent, or understandable, in their eyes, their feeling of autonomy will not necessarily be impaired if they do not have everything they need to know right at their fingertips" (Aoki 1999:145). A student explains: "They should explain the content, suggest further readings... In relation to the language, to suggest an accessible grammar which we can further explore..." (Mara, junior). However, teachers do not always recommend useful references so students are frequently left to their own imagination. Students also know that it does not suffice to offer a lecture, as interesting as it may be. Teachers should open the door to the field of practice and professional development: "They should open our horizons a little. Some workshops, grants, some silly little things for which you ask, everyone knows the answer, but they keep silent, no one will tell you anything. (...) No one has offered us opportunities. There's no openness toward the present; instead, the university is like a middle-ages institution, and when you get out, you don't have anything to relate to." (Nancy, junior).

The trench between us and them, between teachers and students, is maintained through this denial of useful information. Knowledge is perceived as transferable goods which change their owners and at the moment students take possession of knowledge, they become us. Teachers might be afraid that this new situation will make them jobless or powerless, but there is no real fear of that. The problem actually resides in a sense of importance because once students get what they need from their teachers, students will abandon them. Teachers are not important any more but are reduced to episodes in students' learning histories.

In an attempt to defend themselves from intruders, teachers assume an attitude of authority that will keep them apart from their students. Students then comply with this enforced detachment since they want to be accepted into the cultural milieu. However, this state of affairs does not have a beneficial effect for the learning environment. "It's counterproductive when they come with that superficial authority which puts them above everything. You don't have to tell me that. I know what you've been through; I know what I've been through. You don't have to tell me. You shouldn't assume that I'll disrespect you or treat you as an equal or subordinate, or whatever. The teacher should come and have an attitude like, ok, we're here to work, we'll see how to work together; not like, good day, I'm your professor, you must do this and that." (Juliet, sophomore). The teacher is surrounded with a halo of authority that comes from knowledge, professional experience, and age and students are conscious that in the three areas they are inferior to their teachers, which puts them in a very fragile position. When this authority is further promoted through an arrogant attitude, students may want to defend their jeopardized sense of self-respect and react with revolt. They tend to perceive their authoritarian teacher as an adversary which prolongs the situation of mutual detachment.

On the contrary, when a teacher facilitates the process of learning and introduces students into the camp of professional expertise, the students' response is more favorable. Thus, a student described her translation course in terms of togetherness: "He really does

his best to approach us, to approach students, not to look down on us. He really tries to be more like us, so to say, to come closer to us. (...) I think I could really ask him anything.” (Rachel, junior). This sense of togetherness and safe environment is crucial for students to feel free to actively participate. This is not surprising since feelings influence the learning process in many different ways (Heron 1992).

Conclusion

Students initiate their university-level education with a preexisting set of beliefs and attitudes about language instruction, the way it should be organized and how it should be carried out. They look for a model of the proper instruction in their previous language learning experience which is mostly associated with traditional language teaching methods. Thus, when they are confronted with a new approach to language learning which engages them on the whole new intellectual and affective level, they are hesitant, apprehensive, and worried. Adapting to new practices and policies requires much effort, no matter how good these practices are. Students may feel lost because they do not have a criterion to judge their engagement in the new approach to language learning. “I feel as if I’d like to work more, to study harder because... I don’t know... When they ask me about the university, I say it’s fine but I don’t know what that means” (Melany, freshman). There is little doubt that a relationship exists between autonomy and beliefs. As a matter of fact, Cotterall (1995) emphasizes that beliefs about language learning are likely to reflect students’ readiness for autonomy. These beliefs will affect and sometimes inhibit learners’ receptiveness to the ideas and activities presented in the language class, particularly when the approach is not consonant with the learners’ experience. Cotterall (1999) also reports on trends in learner beliefs that reveal autonomy favoring behavior and those that do not, which means that some beliefs may in fact have a harmful effect on students’ autonomy. She points out that it is possible to identify a learner’s willingness to learn autonomously which implies that not only should beliefs be seen as possibly influencing action, but also as shaping attitudes. This conviction has led most European educational authorities to include “developing the learner’s autonomy” as one of the general objectives of their national curricula for modern languages (Gremmo and Riley 1995:155).

The promotion of learner autonomy assumes psychological dimensions, but it is also inevitably political since “the psychological argument challenges traditional educational structures and power relationships” (Little 1996:8). Dewey (1916) contends that the learning experience includes an active and a passive element, that is, trying and undergoing. In other words, experience involves a connection between trying and doing with undergoing consequences of one’s actions. There is a decision, an activity toward the execution of that decision, and the subsequent undergoing of consequences of the decision and action. If an individual does not participate in either of these processes, they are denied a complete experience. Thus, it seems that many students in this study do not fully experience their learning; they only undergo their education which augments their revolt and frustration as they progress through university education. They take on their passive role which is presented to them through the overall cultural model of education. A freshman believes that students’ obligations are “to do what the teacher says” (Sue,

freshman). Even though students question the system, most still do not really take an active role in their learning experience.

However, there were a few exceptional examples of students who were able to take control of their own learning, to become autonomous. They maintained that it takes high self-discipline, effort, and constant work to be successful. When I inquired whether adolescents are generally mature enough to take such a responsible attitude, a junior student replied that not all need to have a university degree. Indeed, according to the official data of the National Institute for Statistics, only eleven percent of the Serbian population had a secondary- or university-level degree in 2002.

This intolerance toward the weaknesses of others might have deeper roots in the social and historical context of Serbia. Leftovers of the socialist laid-back attitude are still visible in many different realms of our social reality, including university education. Until recently, the possibility of “social-loafing” has represented an integral part of university, economic, politic, or any other engagement. There have been a few exceptional individuals who have been the motors of the society with their hard work and progressive ideas, but these exceptional individuals have finally had enough of it. Now they want their effort to be appreciated even more so when they see that a different system is promising better results with less effort.

It is not surprising then that there seemed to be a delicate animosity between the students who were still following the old curriculum (juniors and seniors) and the students who were studying in accordance to the propositions of the Declaration of Bologna (1999) (freshmen and sophomores). Formally, older students explained that they felt uncertain whether the new curriculum would work for them. Also, most juniors tended to question the quality of the new program. After all, it could not be that learning was so easy and presented in an accessible way. In fact, several students maintained that the old program was providing them with more knowledge. When I asked a student why she felt that way, she replied: “Because [a professor] said so. He said that we will leave the university with some knowledge and they will leave the university with no knowledge.” (Stephanie, junior). It is remarkable how strongly a teacher’s authority influences students. Within the traditional and still prevailing cultural model, an intellectual approach to education is frequently taken for granted within family life, education, politics... It does not only emphasize the supremacy of intellect, it also implies hierarchical order among individuals, students and teachers in this case. Teacher authority comes with power and with right to exert that power. The others passively comply with the imposed norms and they hope to survive so that they are ritually handed over the power in the form of a university degree.

The qualitative data from the student interviews suggested that students are particularly docile at the beginning of their academic career since they do not question the acculturated norms. Nevertheless, if they are exposed to a different model of education, they do not automatically reject it. As Green (1993) suggests, students value activities for their effectiveness and enjoyment. However, they must be prepared to take responsibility of their own learning. Pennycook (1997) points out that power cannot

simply be handed over. Students need to be accustomed to reflect on their own learning and they need to be taught how to evaluate their learning experience. This process of reflection and self-evaluation will enable them to make appropriate decisions in relation to their learning. It does not suffice to involve students into a novel and progressive approach; it must be explained to them so that students may actually understand and internalize the underlying tenets of the new approach. It is possible that not all students are at the level of understanding the basic assumptions of the current theories of second language acquisition, but this matter should be made approachable through strategy and metacognition training. This implies that at the time of curriculum implementation, the responsibility of educators and policy makers transcends the traditional transmission of knowledge to include facilitation of autonomous learning.

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