

TEACHING ENGLISH IN SEVERAL CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

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Abstract: The Central and Eastern European countries find themselves at present, following a period of transition in all domains, education included. One of the greatest challenges is providing sufficient foreign language education so as to meet the growing demand especially after along period of time when foreign languages were seriously and damagingly neglected. This paper is an attempt to briefly present the way English language is taught in several Central and Eastern European Countries as well as to underline the importance of this educational process and maybe to offer some applicable solutions to teaching English in Romania.

Key words: education, English, methodology

Historical Background

The critical changes which took place in the former Communist bloc following the events of 1989/1990 prompted a huge influx of native speakers of English as teachers and entrepreneurs. It has been a period of dramatic struggle to meet the growing demand for communication in a foreign language, especially English.

That phase is now over and countries in the Central and Eastern Europe like Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria are flourishing stable democracies. Many of those countries were admitted to the European Union and are now sometimes referred to as “the New Europe”.

The term Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is still used by telecoms companies and government agencies as a convenient label for the countries east of Germany including Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria, the Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia) and south to the Balkans (Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina). Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus can also be included for convenience. Yet the present paper will only focus on a few of the above mentioned countries, namely Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria. The focus on these countries is extremely interesting since the situation of the main international communication languages in central and Eastern Europe changed considerably due to the political and economic upheavals of 1989.

For centuries learning of foreign languages was a stable component of the general culture of educated people in Eastern Europe. Before the Second World War, the learning of at least one living language, not to mention the learning of Latin or Greek as well, was widespread in the stated region. Moreover, certain countries have openly and traditionally expressed their preferences for a particular foreign language (e.g. Romania and Bulgaria for French, Hungary and Czechoslovakia for German).

The end of the Second World War was the beginning of a new historical period for CEE countries; they fell under the domination of the Soviet Union and were forced to give up the connections and links with Western Europe. For the teaching and learning of foreign (western) languages process it was a painful change as they were all suppressed leaving room only for Russian as a compulsory subject for all levels of education.

From the 1970 onwards the introduction of a second foreign language (English, French, and German) was possible even if only at a voluntary basis, but it gradually becoming standard. In Romania, because of the image of French as great language of culture and opening, this language remained the first foreign language learnt (60% of pupils, meaning 1.2 million French learners) (Ferenc, Peluau, 2003: 95). While English was in a second position throughout the country, it held first place in Bucharest.

Times have changed in Central Europe. Along with political and economic changes have come changes in the educational system. A fair description of the educational background in CEE states must start with the fact it is undergoing a radical period of transition: new laws are debated, new programs are being re-conceived, new priorities are set.

After 1989 there was a radical change in the approach of foreign language teaching. The need for English language instruction to meet overwhelming demand at all levels of instruction is challenges governments to provide large number of English teachers while, at the same time maintaining the same quality of education.

For instance, in Romania in 1990 there was decree that made the teaching of a foreign language compulsory starting with 8 years of age. While the demand of English is increasing, there is a shortage of qualified English teachers. Moreover few language graduates choose teaching because of the low remuneration of teachers. In some cases teachers weak in English language skills or lacking training are hired to fill the gap. Other times native English-speaking training professionals can make a substantial contribution during this time of expansion. There are many challenges and difficulties to overcome. "Training new teachers, designing new programs, and making effective use of native English speaking teachers are some of the issues they face in developing English language teaching" (Schleppegrell:1991).

English education in Central and Eastern Europe

English is taught at all levels in CEE countries: at primary, secondary and high schools, universities, colleges and special courses for adults. Recognizing the importance of early learning of foreign languages, the Central and Eastern European governments would like to make English available for all students starting in early stages of education(second, third grades). These children receive from about two-three hours of English weekly in the second-third grades up to four-five hours per week in the secondary or high schools.

Poland

Since the democratic revolution and the collapse of the Soviet sphere of influence, the language teaching situation in Poland has changed dramatically. Previously Russian was taught in primary and secondary schools almost exclusively. Now Russian is taught very little, and naturally English has become very popular.

In high school most students study German or English, at some schools both. A lack of qualified teachers of English and the very poor pay that teachers receive here in public schools means that from city to city and from school to school the amount and quality of ELT varies greatly. There are either two or four hours of English per week, for four years. The aim is to bring students to a pre-intermediate level at the end of studies. There is no firmly established curriculum, so schools make their own decisions about what books and methods to use in teaching.

There are enough schools – both public and private – in larger cities or more out-of-the-way places. In Poland, as other areas of Eastern Europe, public school teachers must somehow believe that less is more, not only when it comes to salaries, but also about materials. On the other hand, it is the private sector that provides the majority of English teaching jobs. There are private schools operating all over Poland, although they are more likely to be found in the mi-to large-sized cities. In private schools the curricula and other benefits they provide are less structured than in their public sector counterparts. It's important to understand that private schools are businesses that aim to profit from tuition. Consequently, some of them care more about the bottom line than they do about providing high quality language instruction or about the teachers they employ. Classes at private and public schools are usually forty-five or fifty minutes long, which count as a teaching hour.

"The instructional settings and teacher – student relationships observed in English classes at secondary and university levels in Poland by an American senior Fulbright lecturer are characterized by very formal instructions with heavy emphasis on pronunciation and grammar exercises, large classes with little opportunity for individual participation beyond answering questions and reading passages aloud, and no visual aids other than maps and scenic posters. However, motivation to study English is strong."(Muchisky, Dennis: 1985) Other shortcomings of the teaching-learning process in Poland, but also in most CEE countries are the formal, rigid, sometimes adversarial teacher-student relationship, limited materials that often have to be shared. Nevertheless, tests applied to third year university students reveal a high proficiency in mastering English. Usually a normal class consists of a number of students raging from 25-30, and they study English from two to six hours weekly (those planning on advanced English learning were enrolled in a six hour weekly program).

The methodology used to be a combination of the grammar-translation, reading and audio-lingual methods. Class size limited the individual participation of each student; there is a large amount of memory work, the error correction being seen as a necessary part of the teaching process.

The university study program last for four years, students spend more than 2500 hours in English classes, an average of 22 hours a week. Classes last up to 45-50 minutes each and students have as a result classes with as

many as 20 up to twelve different instructors every semester. The problem with English teaching process is that it does not focus more on what is considered to be EFL classes, meaning listening comprehension, grammar, translation, conversation and composition. Most of the time is being eaten up by courses like: Introduction to Literary Theory, History of England, History of the United States, Phonology, Phonetics, Text Analyses etc. Teacher-student relationship is formal and materials, even more numerous than for high school are not enough.

Nevertheless, the very close history shows quite remarkable headways in teaching methodology, there are different types of exercises for improving grammar, speaking, listening, materials are diverse. Things that still need to be worked on are the student-centered class and the teacher-student relationship.

We cannot underestimate the efforts and precious support supplied by the foreign embassies (The Cultural Service, Department of Linguistic and Educational Cooperation, Alliances Francaises, the British Counsel, the Cultural Centre.) in the promotion and flourishing of pluri-lingual teaching, as well as the continuous work of practitioners and policy-makers. Their collaboration with the Ministry of Education and the associations of language teachers has only served the cause well.

Czech and Slovak Republics

“Before I left to teach English in Prague, I didn’t know what to expect. A friend of mine was teaching there...some people painted idyllic pictures of happy students and satisfied teachers, teachers who could flit to the park in between classes while they worked 25 hours a week.” (Johnson, *Lessons from a Teacher in Prague*).

In the years that have elapsed since the Velvet Revolution there seems to be an equal demand for English in both republics, thus, many Western backed language schools have been joined by many private schools run by locals. The demand for native speakers of English is still strong: “You only need to glance at the *Prague Post* to see that teachers are still in high demand around the two republics” (Teaching English in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, www.jobmonkey.com). By the way, in any given week, 95 percent of the jobs listed in the *Prague Post* are for English teaching positions. The simple explanation is that the Czech educational system is massively under funded. Thus, the teachers who actually speak English at an international level have been drawn to multinational firms and the like, leaving only the least talented to teach at the secondary school level. It's a sad thing for the students. Besides, English is an optional subject

As far as schools are concerned, there are both public and private schools. According to a teacher at one of the larger private schools in Prague, when asked what the future of English teaching was: “the demand itself will not change over the next several years. It will remain high. However, the mode of offering classes will evolve. More small private schools will pop up, and there will be a greater need for private teachers. Studying English has already lost much of its novelty among Czech students, but that doesn’t mean that the demand will fall.” (Teaching English in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, www.jobmonkey.com).

The Czech Language and a foreign language (English, German, French) are the mandatory exam subjects. The exam from each of these subjects takes 15 minutes and it is oral. Students draw one question out of 30 for each exam.

As the economic transformation of these economies continues, more and more Czechs and Slovaks will need to learn to speak English in order to get by in the international business world

Hungary

In Hungary, since the change of the regime, the school system has become very complex. As a result, first year students in secondary schools range from absolute beginners to advanced learners. The number of students is about 30 or fewer in an average class, but classes are usually split during language classes, so there are about 12-18 students in an average English class. Everyone is required to choose at least one language for the school-leaving exam, and speaking English (and other languages) means all kinds of advantages in education and in getting jobs. As a negative result, language learning has become very exam-oriented, especially in the case of English, which is probably the target language in Hungary.

There is also a shortage of professional English teachers in Hungary. There used to be lots of Russian teachers, but as now no one cares about Russian, many of the former Russian teachers are retrained in special programmes to teach English in secondary schools.

Hungarian teachers of English feel more confident of the teaching style the grammar translation method represents. Students are taught many unnecessary explicit rules. The most neglected skill is listening. The most often applied texts are stories, mostly used for reading aloud. Listening and reading comprehension tends to be

checked by sentence by sentence translation. The vast majority of classes are monotonous and boring because of lack of variety of tasks. Most of the classes were teacher-fronted; pair- and group-work was not widely used. Both teachers and students used the mother tongue excessively.

Sometimes an enormous amount of effort, time, money and enthusiasm is wasted, as students at average secondary schools are not streamed according to their levels, but tend to be placed in beginners' groups with students who have done less or no language study.

Fortunately, things seem to be changing these years. More and more teachers are trained and taught to apply new methodologies, concentrating more on language as a means of communication rather than just rules. Also, many native speakers come from GB and the US and teach many classes one additional hour a week.

Romania

In Romania, the study of foreign languages is given special attention now that we are free from communism. It goes without saying that English is number one but French and German even Italian and Spanish are also studied in many Romanian schools. The study of foreign languages begins in the second grade and continues until the end of high school.

At primary school stress is laid on the oral aspect of the language. In the fifth grade elements of grammar and phonetics are introduced in order to give the students the possibility of studying by themselves. In the sixth grade the study of a second language is introduced. At this level i.e. elementary school, there are schools with intensive classes where students have four hours a week.

At high school level there are "normal" classes having three hours a week, "intensive" classes with four hours and "bilingual" classes with seven to nine hours a week. For the bilingual classes we invite native speakers to teach conversation classes, culture and civilization, history and geography. The Romanian teachers teach the "English Book". In Romania we have a national curriculum and the books are made up with British specialists and the students and teachers can choose from three textbooks. Even if English is studied as a foreign language a lot of Romanians know English very well, the Romanians being well known for their ability of learning foreign languages. At university level students study with native speakers as well as with Romanian professors specialized in Great Britain and USA.

The programmes have undergone a constant revision process; the same can also be said for the textbooks. These textbooks as well as the teachers' own production and the use of foreign methods have succeeded in replacing old teaching methods. It is only now that we can state that after a continuous struggle to improve the old, inefficient methods the communicative model dominates the methodological and didactic programmes.

Previously, the traditional English class consisted of reading and translating exercises, endless grammar drills. Unfortunately, even if today we like to consider that English classes exercise the different areas necessary for language competence, work through discussions, focus on the senses or sensory reactions, the situation is not always the same. Sometimes learning groups are too large and reading and translating exercises are too many. Another shortcoming of the education process is that classes are still too much teacher-oriented. Thus, the picture is not quite as rosy. Above and beyond the pervasive lack of materials, an increasing gulf has widened between urban and rural situations where the lack of qualified personnel significantly reduces the quality of education.

The modern approach in teaching in general and teaching English in particular means innovation, communication, team work, adaptability, flexibility and problem solving. It is a difficult road from extremely rigid conditions to a more open environment.

Conclusions

As stated in introduction, the aim of this paper is to review some important issues of the educational system in several CEE countries and thus here are some preliminary conclusions of the research:

- There have been major changes at all levels, education included, in all CEE countries after the 1989 revolutions;
- The importance of foreign language teaching became of utmost importance in all the studied countries;
- Even if there were a lot of difficulties to overcome, progress in teaching English in all the countries presented, is easy to be noticed;

- There are still problems to deal with in all the countries researched: proper and sufficient teaching materials, student-oriented approach, homogeneity between cities and countryside areas;
- There is a strong motivation for learning English in all the studied countries.

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