Multicultural classroom challenges of Bulgarian language teaching

Emilia Koycheva¹, Savina Manevska²,

¹Department of Languages and Sport, Agricultural University – Plovdiv
²Czech College - Prague

Running title: Multicultural Classroom Challenges of Bulgarian Language Teaching

Abstract
Globalization of university studies worldwide has been increasing. The situation in Europe is similar, especially after the adoption of the Lisbon Convention (1997) followed by the Bologna Process (started in 1999). The Lisbon Recognition Convention provides an improved international framework for the assessment and recognition of higher education qualifications. It facilitates the mobility of individuals and their wish to study in universities abroad and guarantees equal standards and quality of education. Bulgarian higher education institutions have undergone changes in this direction. An increasing number of international students are attracted by the Bulgarian establishments every year. Universities strive for internationalization and competitiveness, this is why they offer a diversity of study programmes using English as a medium of instruction. Nevertheless, they have strong traditions in teaching international students via Bulgarian. Similar is the case with the Department of Languages and Sport at the Agricultural University (AU) – Plovdiv, where teaching Bulgarian as a foreign language dates back in 1951. Over the years students around the world have chosen the AU to obtain their higher education degree. Bulgarian language tutors have geared various teaching methodologies to the multicultural classes. At present, both students and tutors correctly understand and respect language, cultural and religious identity and demonstrate awareness and willingness for mutual cooperation towards achieving high-level learning experience.

Practical application
The present research is referring to an important part of the Bulgarian higher education – preparing and adapting international students for study programmes with Bulgarian as a medium of instruction. Universities face challenges when working with international students in a multicultural classroom. To provide high-quality education and to adapt students to the academic, cultural and social environment, preparatory courses are developed. Such courses are organized in the Language Departments of the Bulgarian higher institutions. International students gain knowledge of Bulgarian language at all linguistic levels. On one hand, tutors have to be flexible and develop their teaching skills and methodology in the fast-changing environment. On the other hand, students have to adjust themselves to the new academic and social life. According to the research, mechanisms are suggested for improvement in multi-language teaching and are applicable to various areas of language adaptation courses.

Key words: Bulgarian language, medium of instruction, preparatory course
**Introduction**

The fast-changing world these days suggests changes in many areas, including the higher education. Universities try to adapt to the new situation. They strive to provide high-quality education and open borders for students and academic staff. People all over the world are willing to cross their national boundaries due to the globalization in spheres of life. In order to achieve it, they search opportunities for studies abroad. As demand for higher education places grow, so the number of higher education students at universities outside their home countries is growing (Denis Blight, Dorothy Davis, Alan Olsen, 1999).

For several years European countries have tried to adapt to this reality. At present, 48 European states actively participate in the Bologna Process. The Bologna process led to the formation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) aiming at achieving comparable and compatible systems of higher education in order to facilitate mobility and to provide equitable student access at universities. It also aims at making Europe’s higher education institutions more attractive and competitive worldwide. According to Eurostat, the number of international students in Europe has been steadily increasing. Data showed that in 2008 the number of foreign students enrolled in first and second stage of higher education was 495,695, while in 2012 their number reached 650,463.

Since 1999 Bulgaria has been a full member of the Bologna Process and the EHEA. Bulgaria ranks 26-th among the countries of the Bologna process in higher education quality with 3.7 of all possible 5 points – as much as France and Greece (EMN Main Study 2012: Immigration of International Students to the EU). Adopting common educational policies, the country is directed in increasing the number of international students. Bulgaria participates in the Euroguidance and Europass initiatives of the European Commission aiming to further promote and facilitate mobility (Eurydice).

Bulgarian universities adopt the national strategy for internationalization. They try to offer attractive conditions for studies not only to Bulgarians, but also to foreign applicants. Taking into account that English is an international language for communication, it is suggested that students from other countries prefer EMI (English medium of instruction) training programmes. It is a reason that some higher schools have developed traditions in teaching through EMI. Nevertheless, there are long traditions in using BMI (Bulgarian medium of instruction) for academic purposes.

The Agricultural University (AU) is narrowly profiled in the field of agricultural sciences. It attracts nationals and foreigners who wish to become specialists in this area. Located in one of the most beautiful and historic cities in Bulgaria, the university offers its trainees rich campus and out-of-campus life.

The Department of Languages and Sport (DLS) at AU – Plovdiv is one of the several national university units that are authorized to conduct preparatory training courses for foreign applicants. The course curriculum is designed according to the Regulation of General Admission Requirements for Students in Higher Institutions of the Republic of Bulgaria. It includes Bulgarian language acquisition, as well as CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning). Students’ groups are formed by various nationalities, cultures, religions, etc. Teachers engaged in language training have to develop their academic skills for the needs of the multinational group. On one hand, … teachers in multicultural classroom should be provided with the knowledge about several cultures of their students, their experiences, communication styles, and learning approaches that are harmonious for all students in the multicultural classroom (Alsubaie M. A., 2015). The author believes that students should work hard to perfect their language skills in order to help them to understand and communicate better and achieve in the multicultural classroom.

Hadjieva (2017) assumes that learning language as a character system for communication and cognition must be complemented by the consistent teaching of the foreign country’s cultural code. Building skills in students to seek a different type of "specific" information in the foreign language contributes to their development as professional translators and experts on the socio-cultural space of the foreign country (Hadjieva E., 2017).

Investigating trainees’ learning abilities and needs would be of great importance for successfully completion of the preparatory course.

**Methodology**

The present research was conducted in the Department of Languages and Sport at AU
Plovdiv during the second semester of the academic year 2016-2017. There were 20 international students enrolled in BMI preparatory programme who participated in the study. The methodology included a two-level instrument widely used for academic surveys – a questionnaire and follow-up discussion. Both methods aimed at gaining statistical data in order to analyse better the current situation and issues related to language learning in a multicultural environment.

Questionnaire
At first, students were instructed to complete a questionnaire based on six 3-scale close-ended questions related to the specific areas of their training (Table 1). The specially designed questionnaire aimed at raising awareness of multilingual class problems and needs. Results would help to elaborate mechanisms for improving classroom work and communication, as well as the overall progress of students.

Follow-up discussion
After processing the questionnaire results, a follow-up discussion took place. It allowed the interviewees to explain their position towards each question and to provide more detailed clarification.

Results and Discussion
1. Do you consider the course curriculum helpful for your further studies? (Figure 1)
75% of all participants consider the course very helpful. It not only develops their existing knowledge but also provides an opportunity to demonstrate their abilities and experience in a more effective way. During the course students were asked to prepare interactive presentations about their native place, local culture, traditions and folklore which turned out to be a very successful tool for adaptation and communication. Out-of-classroom activities were organized by the tutors - city tours and language practices to historical and cultural destinations around the country. Thus, trainees were able to immerse in the language environment and authentic atmosphere.

1/4 th of the students claim that the course is more of a necessity rather than a helpful addition to their study programme. According to what they explained, such courses must be provided by universities for foreign students to help them cope with the new environment by using a universal language of understanding for all students, lecturers and staff from the University.

2. Do you face difficulties understanding your lecturers? (Figure 2)
Only 20% said that they had some difficulties understanding their lecturers because of the foreign accent they were not used to. The rest of the interviewees had no problem communicating with their tutors.

3. Do you think that teaching material is presented in an attractive way? (Figure 3)
Half of the students were satisfied by the teaching methods but the other half considers that lectures could be more interesting (data from the interviews). All interviewees share that they enjoyed their classes, there was a good interaction between classmates and lecturers. Students believe though that an introduction of new technologies in the teaching process will improve immensely their experience.

4. Do lecturers encourage all students to participate in the learning process?
All students agree that lecturers were fair and objective. Equal participation of trainees in the learning process increases their confidence and self-motivation.

5. Do you think that the interaction with your classmates improves the learning process? (Figure 4)
95% of correspondents confirmed that interaction is one of the most important tools for making study experience positive and memorable. Apart from learning new materials, classmates introduce each other to new cultures.
This approach facilitates a better understanding between people from different backgrounds and improves the level of communication. Many of the interviewed students shared that language classes in general implement a dual purpose – improvement of language skills and improvement of interpersonal skills.

6. Do you feel confident in achieving overall progress? (Figure 5)

80% of the students feel confident in achieving overall progress. The other 20% consider they need to work further on the improvement of their knowledge and skills.

Conclusions
The conducted research led to objective results and suggestions. The majority of students is satisfied with the preparatory programme. The designed curriculum, the professional attitude of trainers, as well as the willingness of students to interact with each other are drivers to successfully completion of the course and easier adaptation to the university life. The mutual cooperation and tolerance between tutors and students is crucial for achieving high-level learning experience. However, there was a number of challenges students face during their preparatory course. Most of them are related to difficulties in communicating through the new language. Issues such as specific accents and misinterpretation of translations challenge respondees’ motivation to improve their language skills. Programme leaders have to be flexible in order to avoid misunderstandings and to smoothen the study process.

The lack of development in teaching methodology could lead to lower interest in the programme. Introduction of modern technologies and new-developed activities could improve the classroom atmosphere and the overall results.

Research results indicate several areas where improvements could be implemented:

- indentifying the linguistic, cultural and pedagogical/didactic challenges for the course attendees;
- launching modern technology equipment and various activities in class would raise students' awareness and interest;
- in-classroom and out-of-classroom communication would help for better interaction and cooperation between students;
- constant monitoring and assessment of the new language skills would make trainees become more serious.

References


Table 1: Questionnaire results

Directions: Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each of these questions regarding your BMI preparatory course. Place an “X” mark in the box of your answer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>№</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Do not know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Do you consider the course curriculum helpful for your further studies?</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Do you face difficulties understanding your lecturers?</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Do you think that teaching material is presented in an attractive way?</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Do lecturers encourage all students to participate in the learning process?</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Do you think that the interaction with your classmates improves the learning process?</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Do you feel confident in achieving overall progress?</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Do you consider the course curriculum helpful for your further studies?
Figure 2. Do you face difficulties understanding your lecturers?

Figure 3. Do you think that teaching material is presented in an attractive way?

Figure 4. Do you think that the interaction with your classmates improves the learning process?
Figure 4. Do you think that the interaction with your classmates improves the learning process?

Figure 5. Do you feel confident in achieving overall progress?