



UNDERSTANDING ETHNO-LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA: ENGLISH LANGUAGE IS A BRIDGE TO DIALOGUE

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Abstract. Language policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina has always been a very sensitive and problematic issue. In comparison to the rest of the world, where different languages spark curiosity, diversity, multiculturalism and the will to talk and share experiences with those different from us, on the Balkan Peninsula it can cause controversy and bring on national disputes. However, with the passing of time, we are becoming more democratic and tolerant and we are starting to realize that languages are not a means to separate us even further, but rather a tool to share friendship, love and tolerance among nationalities that possess so many similarities in their languages and culture and thus, share the same environment which is Bosnia & Herzegovina. In addition to the three official languages of Bosnia & Herzegovina and the languages of minorities, English language has an enormous role in shaping the social structure and future perspectives of our society. Through ever-growing exposure to English language, citizens of Bosnia & Herzegovina are getting more and more accustomed to the multicultural and multilingual environment and governmentally getting ready for future in European integrations and values, where we belong.

Key words: languages, disputes, multiculturalism, nationalities, diversity, tolerance, multilingualism, integrations

Historical background

The Balkan Peninsula has always been one of the most diverse, multicultural, and international and multi-religious parts of Europe and of the world. Perhaps it was this diversity that influenced many civilizations and nationalities here to accept those different from themselves. Many empires and

civilizations came and went from these areas, leaving behind mostly ethical values in the peoples they ruled. On these values and on the principles that occupants of these ancient areas had before, creation of intercultural societies emerged and acceptance and hospitality of those differences began.

During the 6th century AD, the Slav people migrated from Old Poland and resettled throughout Eastern Europe. As a result, the Slavic language family divided into three distinct groups: Eastern, Western, and Southern Like Serbian and Croatian, the Bosnian language developed from the South Slavic language group, part of the Common Slavic language subfamily of the Indo-European family of languages.¹

As people here are willing to welcome everyone's tradition and cultural background, the same applies to languages. Dozens of foreign languages have been spoken here and learned in the previous centuries, from Turkish and German, to English language in the present day, and people living in these areas were quite good at it. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a small but very interesting and lovely country in the Balkans and well known around the world through its multiculturalism and diversity in every aspect of life, and therefore languages.

The capital of Bosnia is probably the most multicultural city in Europe, where the Catholic and Orthodox Church stand next to each other and great mosques are neighbours with the synagogue, down the street from the first two. When looking at Sarajevo from one of the surrounding hills the tall minarets cross the sky but the more observant eye will spot church towers as well.²

There are three official languages, belonging to the three major ethnic groups living here and who knows how many more variations of the three languages and accents. Perhaps, since people of Bosnia and Herzegovina are so good in language skills, English Language was not an issue for them.

Bosnia and Herzegovina in communism

During the period when Bosnia and Herzegovina was a part of the former Yugoslavia (SFRJ), in the school and universities, Russian, German and French were the main foreign languages that were taught. Since former Yugoslavia was more oriented to the "eastern" and communist world views, Russian language as a

¹ Retrieved from (alsintl.com), January 2016

² Retrieved from (mywanderlust.com), January 2016

second language had the main role while English language was still left far away from people and schools.

By the 1990's, all the Slavic countries with the exception of former Yugoslavia, were the members of "Warsaw agreement" and by that part of the "Eastern bloc" under the rule of Soviet Union. From the linguistic-political point of view, domination of Russian language was characteristically usual for "Eastern bloc" Russian language was the official language of communication and "lingua franca" as well. (Grčević, 2011)

The population was 4,364,574 in 1991. A U.S. estimate of the population in July 2000 was 3,835,777; however, that figure is not reliable as a result of dislocations and deaths caused by war. In 1991, approximately 44 percent of the people were Bosniak, 31 percent were Serb, 17 percent were Croat, 5.5 percent were Yugoslav (of mixed ethnicity), and 2.5 percent were of other ethnicities. Since 1995, the country has been internally divided into a Bosniak/Croat Federation, which controls 51 percent of the land and whose majority is Bosniak and Croat, and a Serb Republic, which has the other 49 percent and has a Serb majority.³

These views of languages were part of the "east" and west" block world division, therefore Balkan countries, including Bosnia and Herzegovina were more familiar with the Russian Language and one had to learn because not only for political views, but similarities and belonging to the Slavic group of languages, such as; Croatian, Slovenian, Serbian, Russian, etc. This were the happenings in the Balkan Peninsula and Bosnia and Herzegovina during the years of (1920-1970) and in this period, English language was still somewhere on the margins of the linguistic community and curriculums. However, things were about to change, slowly but surely.

Sociopolitical turmoil and English language

As the 20th century was coming to an end, ways of thinking and living were about to change dramatically in Bosnia and Herzegovina. During the 70's and 80's of the past century, "western influence" started to dominate way of living in this country. Through media, fashion and clothing, books, movies and music, English language has infiltrated the minds of people and slowly took control when it comes

³ Retrieved from (everyculture.com), January 2016

to the primary foreign language to know and look for. Citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina started to think, walk and talk like the people in the “west” do and therefore they started to abandon Russian, Soviet and communist conservative principles. At the end of the 1980’s and at the beginning of the 1990’s, huge accelerator of this change of thinking was also unfortunate political turmoil’s which would eventually lead into the bloody war in Bosnia and Herzegovina which lasted for 4 years (1991-1995) and took lives of some 100.000 people and left thousands more without home and loved ones.

Three predominant groups in Bosnia & Herzegovina were influenced by the spread of nationalism in the neighboring countries and this resulted in the formation of three ethnically influenced social groups namely, Serbs, Croats and Bosnians. Croats and Bosniaks didn’t want to stay in the Serb-dominant Yugoslav Federation and they opted for referendum (Imamovic, 1997)

English was the language of the globe and of science and even the nations that once built the parts of a common culture but were now separated could be made familiar through English. Bosnian culture – one time sharing a common culture with Turks – could now be revealed and restored to me, and mine to them, by means of English. English, in this sense, was more than a foreign language but an indispensable tool for the (re)discovery and understanding of a common cultural past and an estranged present. (Bal, 2012)

Slavic languages such as Russian, Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian share many similarities with English language, especially in the grammar and sentence structure. Bosnian language shares same property of sentence structure as English language does and that is subject, verb, and object (SVO) agreement.

Ja (s) radim(v) u pošti.(o)

I(s) work(v) in the post office. (o)

Hospitality toward new languages

However it is not only the grammar, sentence structure and vocabulary similarities that make it easy for Bosnia and Herzegovina citizens to know English language well, at least on the basic level. It is also their will, curiosity to something new and acceptance of different cultures that makes it also easier to us to comprehend new language. Nevertheless, it is hard today to separate our daily existence from the influence of English language. English language is today more dominant than any other language throughout history on a global scale. English language is literally everywhere, in the media, technology (smart phones, internet,

and computers), movies, business, tourism, sports and English language is there. Due to this fact it is hard not to know at least some basic things from English language such as; ask for direction or show one, world sides

People of Bosnia and Herzegovina are very sociable and hospitable. Curiosity often makes them overly straight-forward when encountering newcomers. It is culturally appropriate to ask more personal questions such as "Where are you from?", "Are you married?", "Do you have children?", "What do you do for living?" etc., numbers etc. Humour is always welcome, but it will depend on the person you meet. When meeting someone for the first time, never use topics about religion or nationality. It may offend other people. Humour about marriage, mother-in-laws or politicians socially acceptable.⁴

However, we are well acquainted with the political situation on the global scale and we know that not all societies are flexible as Bosnia and Herzegovina is. Some countries and societies won't allow anything "western" to reach them and they distance themselves from that so their knowledge of English language is still not that good.

France should end its blockade of the English language, since its "generous" contributions have enriched rather than endangered French, according to France's culture minister. Fleur Pellerin warned purists bent on defending the French language that the struggle was counterproductive. France's 1994 Toubon law decreed that all public advertising must be in French. Public services are expected to replace English words that creep into the language – in particular for new technologies – with French terms.⁵

Using literature to familiarise our students with the cultural and ideological differences of the studied language to inspire enthusiasm for the language as well as develop feelings and artistic perspectives, in other words, the "Cultural Model" of teaching English through literature. It was rather the "Personal Growth Model", through which literature could be seen as a provider of necessary reading materials for our students to mature in terms of understanding and appreciation of cultures both of their own and of the language they studied (Carter and Long, 1991).

⁴ Retrieved from (intercultures.ca) January 2016

⁵ Retrieved from (telegraf.co.uk) March 4, 2016

Curriculum altering

In the post war era, our country's educational system brought English language as mandatory subject to be taught in the schools. Learning of English language starts in the fourth grade of elementary school while kids are at the age around 10 years old and many pedagogues, teachers and linguistic are of the opinion that English language should be taught in school even earlier, such as first or second grade. This would surely be more efficient since it has been proven that kids tend to learn foreign languages better at a more early age. However, thanks to the intelligence, motivation and desire to learn, good professors and learning material, most of our children and teenagers know English language very well.

Therefore, the country was extremely divided. (Both Ivo Andric and Evliya Çelebi would need three times longer lives to be able to navigate the region in its present form.) In a nutshell, being a country in the making, Bosnia and Herzegovina during the first half of the first decade of the new millennium was a country which was torn into many pieces, whose administrative bodies and laws were being formed, and it has ever been formed and reformed up to this day, and in direct effect, making it difficult for our establishment of a university as well as an English Language and Literature department as one of its programs. (Bal, 2012)

Advantages of bilingualism

Not only the younger population is exposed and well acquainted with the English language, a similar situation exists with the adults. Whether by their own will or because of the expanded employment possibilities the adult population in Bosnia and Herzegovina also knows English language very well. They didn't learn English in schools, but from the courses or plain exposure and practice. Of course, the level of knowledge of English language varies from person to person, but most of the active, working adult citizens know English language at least at beginner level.

Being bilingual is a big advantage today, no matter where you live or work. It is great to live in the United States and know Spanish or French Language besides of course his or hers native, English language. I mentioned French and Spanish language since US citizens are mostly influenced by those two for foreign language perspective, many people came to US from Hispanic countries and neighboring Canada has a huge French speaking population. As people in America are surrounded with other world languages, besides English, so are people in

Bosnia and Herzegovina. They are in the geographical heart of Europe and at the same time at the crossroads of the cultures, civilizations and religions.

Acceptance of cultural diversities

From early childhood, most of the Bosnia and Herzegovina citizens are being taught and getting to know that they are surrounded by many different countries, languages and traditions and considering those circumstances they are accustomed to learn new languages and appreciate varieties of cultures and languages. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country that strives toward European values and European Union and so are its citizens. In order to be European citizen, one must be tolerable toward different nationalities, cultures, tradition, religion and languages and people of Bosnia and Herzegovina certainly are tolerable, hospitable and welcoming all those with good will and intentions, no matter where are they from.

In this context, we are open to learn new languages and appreciate the cultural background of native users of that language, therefore making it easier for us to acquire new language sooner and better, in this case English language.

For most language learners, English language is not that difficult to learn and use in every day conversations. Its grammar is relatively easy in comparison to other European and World languages, vocabulary and pronunciation is not that difficult, and exposure alone to the English language makes it learn friendly, since its more or less all around us.

Unlike other languages, English has no cases, no gender, no word agreement, and arguably has a simple grammar system. English speakers sometimes have difficulties when learning Portuguese because they are not used to words having genders. – The reason why English is the easiest language to learn is because of the vast selection of English resources to learn from, including TV shows, movies, music, podcasts, books and websites. English is the most studied foreign language in the world and there are a ton of resources available to help speakers of each specific language learn English. There are thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of books written about learning English as a foreign language that you can use to improve. In addition there are a ton of great English learning blogs on the internet.⁶

⁶ Retrieved from (reallifeglobal.com) January 2016

Despite the complicated political situation and weak economic status and capabilities of Bosnia and Herzegovina citizens, every day they are still trying hard and not giving up for hope in better tomorrow not just for themselves, but for their children and grandchildren as well. Important aspects of that hope is going to school, university and looking for job or doing your best at your current employment and maintaining it. Through doing this people tend to acquire new acquaintances, meet people from all around the world and develop certain foreign language speaking skills. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a great place to learn English language. There are hundreds of students coming from different parts of Europe and the world, many international companies, European institutions and media exposure of English language. Therefore, English language is not that foreign at all, it is becoming part of life.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that English language will continue its dominance worldwide and also in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Under this influence, people living here will continue to learn and work on their fluency and knowledge of English language because such a scenario is inevitable and useful also for job opportunities. We have been open and flexible toward new languages and cultures so far and we are probably going to remain the same in the future. Since world is becoming more and more interconnected due to the influence of mostly internet and countless possibilities it provides, so will our country and region follow the same trend and try not to fall behind. Language of this never more interconnected world is one and only English language and by knowing and mastering it, the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina will prove that they belong only in Europe and the world. They have suffered a lot in the 1990's war and still suffering and feeling disastrous consequences of it, but things are slowly improving and this country took certain steps forward in becoming a member of the European Union and Euro-Atlantic integrations. By doing good, progressing and achieving certain goals, Bosnia and Herzegovina has no other way but to go forward, along with its citizens. Consequently, people will become more aware of diversities that all of us share in terms of language, culture, race, religion etc, and more of them will realize the importance of learning languages and being bilingual or multilingual.

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