

PROBLEMS OF VOLUNTARY RETURNEES CHILDREN IN MOTHER TONGUE ACQUISITION

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ABSTRACT

Albanian society experienced emigration during the last twenty years. This phenomenon was associated with a major problem: the negligence of the mother tongue and its marginality in relation to the foreign language of the host country.

This research examines some of the learning difficulties of the mother tongue posed to returned emigrant's children when they integrate in Albanian schools. We have tried to tackle the problem both theoretically and practically. On the theoretical side, it is underlined the importance of learning the mother tongue, the advantages of a bilingual child and the benefits from mother tongue.

On the practical side, aiming to have a closer look at the situation, we met schoolchildren, teachers, and also parents in one of the cities which has the biggest number of voluntary returnee families, interviewed schoolchildren, teachers and visited an immigrant family.

In conclusion we suggest, for voluntary returnees children to be able to easily integrate in the society and become an active factor in the education process. Specific programs which address their needs must be designed and implemented. These children should be constantly and continuously helped by teachers, psychologists and their respective families.

Keywords: Mother tongue, adaptation to school, survey, foreign language, children's integration

INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s with the political turn, Albanian society faced massive emigration (IOM 2007) to foreign countries, particularly Greece. Those who emigrated were mainly new families and young people who created their own families away from the homeland. Children who were integrated in kindergartens and schools, being at an early age found it very easy to learn Greek (L2) faster than their parents. The latter, wishing to integrate in the host society, started to communicate with their children in Greek (L2) by 'exploiting' their knowledge. The first generation of emigrants' children gradually began to lose their mother tongue (L1). The foreign language (L2) was becoming very important in fulfilling educational and social functions.

Emigrant parents, after some years of economic safety, realized that their mother tongue was getting lost.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The global economic crisis, which hit our region, especially Greece, had direct consequences for the emigrants. Over the last two years, a great number of households, together with their children have come back to Albania and the process still continues.

The Albanian government adopted in 9 June 2010 the Strategy for Reintegrating Albanian Returnees, which incorporates the 5-year period 2010 - 2015. The strategy is part of national policies for emigration. Its vision is to ensure a sustainable return of emigrants through the support process of reintegration.

According to the Ministry of Education reports, there are 5000 children of all ages, returned from emigration together with their families. They are faced with many difficulties in their schools, especially with their mother tongue.

RESEARCH FOCUS

Our focus of research is oriented towards the problems these bilingual children have when they come back from emigration and settle in Albanian community. Some of these children can hardly speak their mother tongue, and some commit a lot of grammatical mistakes when they try to speak in Albanian (L1). The recipient community, i.e. their schoolmates and their teachers, frequently notice that there are occurring problems in the articulation of certain sounds and there are shifts in word order or replacement of some phrases with L 2 phrases. We tried to approach the phenomenon by analyzing the real situation of these voluntary returnees' children mainly in the school environment. We noticed that the schools needed more initiatives and instruments to improve the current situation.

GENERAL BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCH

Children who together with their families went to emigration, particularly children who were born in emigration, being only in contact with Greek language (L2), which was the language of their environment, started to lose their mother tongue (L1). As Lannenberg, E. H. (1971) states, the process of mother tongue acquisition on the part of the child is time-bound. He continues with the idea that at approximately the age of four the child reaches complete command of mother tongue usage.

Due to this reason, during 1997-2010 emigrant associations have continuously required that the Albanian government should provide some help at equipping these children with an ABC book. The social opinion as well - journalists and teachers - often raised emigrants' problems in the media. Some courses were opened free of charge during summer holidays where Albanian emigrant teachers worked voluntarily to teach Albanian. These attempts were individual initiatives, because the Albanian government did not consider the issue very seriously, and the consequences are evident in Albanian schools, especially in the South of Albania, the part of the country from which many Albanians emigrated to Greece.

Due to our critical and analytical approaches, the preservation of mother tongue in emigration is important for these reasons:

- i. Parents and children's communication in their mother tongue plays an essential role in the development of spiritual and emotional world of children. Even if the parents excel in speaking very fluently the foreign language, they would never be able to transmit to their children the complexity of human feelings and emotions such as love, caress, security, delight, dislike, refusal, disagreement, pain, suffer, anger, hate, etc.
- ii. The fear frequently expressed that learning the mother tongue prevents complete acquisition of the language of the host country where the emigrant lives, is unsupported in many directions. The studies have shown that the better the child knows the mother tongue, the better he acquires other foreign languages. Scholars like Ianco-Worall 1972, Ben-Zeev 1977, indicate that bilingual children, see the phenomenon in a more analytical way than the others. That is obvious, because a

- child who has been brought up in two different linguistic realities, has certainly developed even the appropriate psychic capacities for their acquisition. These children will later have more facilities to learn other foreign languages.
- iii. The phenomenon of acquiring a language Savoia M. L. (2001) is a psychic and complex process which takes place within the human brain. Through language abundant information connected with a particular society is transmitted to a child, together with other notions and concepts, experience and traditions, etc., which in the concrete case are peculiar for the Albanian society. Living in this multilingual reality the future citizen develops not only his psychic skills, but also those cognitive ones.
 - iv. Acquisition of the mother tongue is also important for individual social status. Knowing the mother tongue (L1) means not only knowing the place of origin, but in the first place the preservation of centurial family bonds. It means communication opportunities with the relatives ranging from grandparents and cousins to those who will be born later. Modern society emphasizes more than ever the importance of the family. Living in an open world the individual risks to lose, get isolated and detached from what is very significant to him, communication to other people. Family is the only institution, which provides the main support, especially in difficult situations.
 - v. According to Baker (2000, p.2) the children who learn two languages have Curriculum Advantages, because they have increased curriculum achievement and find it easier to learn a third language. For example, in our case study, a child who lived in Greece and speaks Albanian finds it easier to learn English, simply due to common Roman words that Albanian shares with English. Baker (2000, p.2) also underlines the fact that these children in the future have greater tolerance and less racism.
 - vi. Learning L1 is associated with some facilities, which the child could possibly have in the future. Being a member of two or more linguistic or cultural communities, as it is happening with many Albanians lately, means becoming a more sustainable member of a global system, who survives due to diversity and communication. Albanian is still a rare language, but contacts with other countries are becoming more and more frequent. Knowing it at a good level means a priority for the child, means better job opportunities, means activity in a relatively limited area.
 - vii. As every people, even Albanians have fixed their inner world, their history and traditions firstly in their language. Its loss means loss of these children's past.

INSTRUMENTS AND PROCEDURES

The main contribution to our research was the use of different instruments and procedures to provide a complete view of the situation. We prepared questionnaires for voluntary returnees' schoolchildren, we analyzed the surveys conducted with these schoolchildren to evaluate student's L1 competence, and we paid a visit to an emigrant's family. We decided to look closer at their problems by obtaining the information from different sources:

- I. The Ministry of Education
- II. Schoolchildren
- III. Teachers and school psychologist
- IV. Parents

Table 1. Questionnaire with voluntary returnee schoolchildren

Question	Answer
1) Which language do you know better:	
a. L1	a. ----
b. L2	b. 100%
c. another one	c. ---
2) What language do you like to do your homework in?	
a. L1	a. ----
b. L2	b. 100% L2
3) In what environment do you speak more L1?	
a. at school	a. 10%
b. at home	b. 60%
c. when you play with friends	c. 30%
4) In which subject do you find more difficulties?	
a. Social	a. 100% in Albanian grammar, literature, history.
b. Scientific	b. We feel better in natural sciences
5) Albanian language (L1) you:	
a. do not understand	a. 10% I do not understand it;
b. do not speak	b. 80% I speak it full of errors;
c. do not write	c. 10% I do not write it
6) You commit errors in speaking because:	
a. you do not pronounce words correctly	a. 75% I do not pronounce words very well
b. you do not construct a sentence properly	b. 20% I do not construct sentences very well
c. you do not know the words	c. 5% I do not know many words
6) Who helps you most to learn Albanian (L1):	
a. parents	a. 33%
b. teachers	b. 60%
c. friends	c. 7%
7) What happens in classroom when you make mistakes while speaking	
	a. Teachers repeat words in order for us to learn them (40%)
	b. Some help us and some laugh (30%)
	c. We get upset (30%)
8) Do you continue to speak at home with your parents in L2	
a. Always	a. 23%
b. Sometimes	b. 74%
c. Never	c. 3%
10) Do you take part in discussions which are raised in your classrooms during the teaching	
a. Always	a. 2%
b. Sometimes	b. 38%
c. Never	c. 60%

With the aim of looking how these schoolchildren are being integrated in schools, at what level their mother tongue is and what kind of difficulties they come across, we decided to go to the city of Gjirokastra (a city bounded by Greece which has the biggest number of voluntary returnees children). In this way we tried to perform our job as linguists by providing some guidance. There are around 490 voluntary returnee school children in 4 primary schools and two secondary ones. In the two secondary schools one can notice the drop out phenomenon, because being grown ups, these schoolchildren find it more difficult to get integrated immediately. In one of the four primary schools of the city, "K. Hoxhi", we met teachers and schoolchildren to approach the issue.

Sample of Research

We carried out a questionnaire with 60 voluntary returnee schoolchildren ranging from 5th to 9th class, but we also discussed with them to better understand the way how they feel in the new environment, what they need, etc.

We paid a visit to a voluntary returnee family composed of mother, father and their three children of different ages: Fabiola 15 years old, Adelina 13 and Klajdi 9. Their mother said:

“My children used to attend a foreign school and they had much insecurity when they started to go to the Albanian school. They had difficulties in everything, starting from the way of speaking, to learning subjects which were their greatest difficulty. Even though my children worked hard and got tired physically and mentally, they could not reach the average and good levels they used to have in school while being in emigration”.

Taking into consideration Parke & Drury (2001) studies, we tried to take under consideration parents inputs concerning this issue, who play a key role in the family. In the table below is described the background of a voluntary returnee family to whom we paid a visit.

Table 3. Background data of a voluntary returnee family

Parents years of speaking L1 and L2	Parents place of birth	Parents, Current position	Parents educational level	Children's names	Gender	Age	Place of birth	Age of exposure to L1	Age of exposure to L2
Mother									
L1-24 years	Albania	Unempyed	High school level	Fabiola	F	15	Albania	0-2 years	2-15 years old
L2-13 years				Adelina	F	13	Greece	currently	0-13 years old
Father									
L1-28 years	Albania	Technician	Professional High school level	Klajdi	M	9	Greece	currently	0-9 years old
L2 -13 years									

We had a thorough conversation with the parents and from their answers we found out that;

- They were not able to help their children with their homework.
- Parents were concerned about their children's performance at school and teachers advised them not to speak in L2 at home but only in L1.
- Parents would still watch both Albanian and Greek TV programs hence they would still be in contact with the L2 at home.
- They claimed that they knew other Albanian families who have hired private tutors to teach Albanian to their children and they were considering the option.

RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

In the Ministry of Education we could not find any relevant studies on the phenomenon but we found some published guidelines addressed to all national educational authorities (DAR and ZA), within the framework of the following governmental guideline:

- Identifying, registering and creating facilitating conditions for the supply of books and necessary school materials in the pre-university system, for the Albanian returned citizens' children.
- The immediate integration of every schoolchild of the returned families in the appropriate classrooms.
- The equivalence of school certificate for the school years a child has computed abroad, according to legal provisions;

4. The creation of teaching programs to assist these schoolchildren identifying all needs according to age-groups.
5. Accomplishing 2 classes per week in the Albanian language.
6. Offering psychological service, ready for assistance.

Teachers who teach Albanian language, at the beginning of the year had conducted this survey with 58 voluntary returnees schoolchildren from 5th to 9th class:

How would students assess their skills in Albanian language (L1)? Put an X in the appropriate column:

Table 2. Teachers' survey on Albanian skills

	<i>Beginner</i>	<i>Intermediate</i>	<i>Advanced/Fluent</i>
Vocabulary	9	13	36
Grammar	50	2	6
Listening Comprehension	1	5	52
Reading	7	43	8
Writing	8	45	5
Speaking Indelibility	18	30	20

From the examination of this survey's results we came to these conclusions:

1. From the table above it is observed that most of the children are intermediate in Albanian: 93 (beginner), 138 (intermediate), 127 (advanced/fluent)
2. The teacher's job should be focused on teaching grammar of L1
3. In skills such as listening comprehension, reading and writing, a few schoolchildren are far behind, and as we noticed mainly young ages (cl.5).

DISCUSSION

1. Mother tongue in schools comprises the main problem for voluntary returnees children
2. The biggest burden for making these children learn L1 has fallen on the teachers and less on parents and society as a whole.
3. Articulation remains the most difficult, because the children not only lack previous practice, but L1 alphabet has more letters than L2. This incompatibility (L1 36 letters, L2 24 letters) makes that sounds such as: *ç/, /ll/, /h/, /zh/, /xh/* of L1, are not properly pronounced by voluntary returnees children, which find their articulation very difficult.
4. The new environment, inability to understand their mother tongue, fear that they commit errors when speaking, has influenced the detachment of these children from the rest of other schoolchildren, which is associated with psychological effects.
5. The school organizes few socio-cultural activities which would help the children to enrich their vocabulary, expand their knowledge about their motherland and better communicate with their friends.

6. In household environment we find more and more the phenomenon of grandparents talking to their grandchildren, since parents are busy working. This has contributed to the children's learning better different dialects and not L1 standard, which is the school required language norm.
7. Despite the fact that parents are very much interested in their children's learning well L1 to better integrate them, they very frequently speak to them in L2, because they do not want to forget their emigration language and sometime they find it easier in being understood by their children.

CONCLUSIONS

Basic compulsory education aims at developing intellectual, creative, practical and physical skills of schoolchildren, developing their personality and equipping them with essential elements of general culture and civil education. All these are accomplished when the schoolchildren are not marginalized but are involved in an active teaching process. The main thing that makes these voluntary returnees children feel integrated and secure is mother tongue acquisition and learning.

The problem of learning the mother tongue as well as integrating voluntary returnees children in Albanian schools, is a problem which incorporates many factors and stakeholders.

To assist these children it is necessary to recruit teachers with good methodical and psychological skills.

These children should learn in not big-sized classrooms, meaning that the number of children in classrooms should not be more than 20, aiming at these children's active participation during teaching process. One of the major activities which should be very frequent in the classroom community is group work.

Psychological service is very important for these children. This service should look for children's adaptability with their school and the establishment of positive relations between children's community and pedagogical staff. For this, it is very important to accomplish adaptability to the environment, school community and offer special intensive programs to accomplish school curricular achievement objectives.

The school should introduce additional cultural and sports activities, through which these children could start communicating more freely with their classmates. School psychologists, mentors and parents, should combine and coordinate their work together.

We suggested to the Linguistics Department the compilation of a respective program with the contribution of phoneticians from Linguistics Department and logo-paeds from the Faculty of Medicine to assist these children in their appropriate articulation of their mother tongue.

In order for this occurring phenomenon to get further consideration and contribute to the future development of Linguistics Department in addressing the problem from different perspectives, students of Master Level should get involved in a concrete research work, being sent as working groups to all schools in our country providing more complete statistics on this phenomenon. Their research work would also contribute to raising awareness to the public and to the Ministry of Education to undertake the necessary measures to improve learning facilities of our mother tongue, encourage parents be aware of improving weaknesses in social subjects and Albanian language, and promoting the importance of extracurricular activities through cultural and sports events.

Schoolchildren coming from an emigrant country, who strive to get integrated in Albanian schools would feel very much welcomed and motivated in their motherland and would not

fear to speak their mother tongue freely, even though in the first years of their return they may commit errors. They should in this way feel secure that there are no hindrances, no prejudice, no high walls, and no humiliation from their friends or surrounding community. They know that the public is very supportive, because their support starts from top to bottom - from governmental initiatives and national school programs to pedagogical staff, parent committees, schoolchildren communities and the wider society. Mother tongue is a significant feature of national identity and everybody should fight to preserve this precious gift.

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