Teaching and learning English in Macedonia

SLOBODANKA DIMOVA

An insight into the current condition and use of English in a Balkan nation

WHEN I started working as an EFL instructor at the Centre for Foreign Languages in Skopje, where I also manage SETREC (the Skopje English Teachers' Resource and Education Center), I became a member of the growing industry of English teaching and learning in the Republic of Macedonia. The number of students seeking EFL instruction at the Centre was growing by the year. The age range of learners was also expanding – students as young as four and older than fifty were enrolled.

While the older students were learning English as a part of their professional development, many children were there because of their parents' ambitions. As a result, some of them simply hated learning English and wanted to run and play with their friends, but others were enthusiastic. In one of my classes, for instance, a 7-year-old girl said to me (in Macedonian, of course), "Teacher, I really like doing my homework for my English class. Yesterday, my mom told me to do my math homework for school first, but I got angry at her and said, mom, math won't do anything for me. English, English will help me to travel around and see the world. I don't want to be stuck in Macedonia."

At her age, she could not possibly have known the importance of knowing English – her opinion was a result of the ambitions of her parents, teachers, older siblings, or relatives, as well as the influence of the popular media.

This and many similar instances motivated me to further investigate the current status of English teaching and learning in Macedonia. Hence, the focus of the present study will be on the spread of English there, within the domain of foreign language education, and it is guided by the following research questions:

- What is the most dominant foreign language taught and learned in R. Macedonia?
- How is English teaching implemented in the Macedonian educational system?
- What are some of the current resources for the teaching and learning of English?

In the following sections, I will discuss the implementation of English in the public and private schools and universities, alongside instruction in such other languages as French, German, and Russian. The information presented and analyzed here is based on statistical data gathered from the State Statistical Office in Skopje and from SETREC's database. The State Statistical Office publishes annual reports of the numbers of foreign language students and instructors in the public elementary schools, high schools, and universities, while SETREC's database provides information about

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private language schools and resources for English language teaching and learning.

English in the public schools

In Macedonia, instruction in primary and high school education is conducted in any of four languages: Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, and Serbian. In 1999-2000, at the elementary level, 168,526 students were taught in Macedonian in 792 schools, 767,752 students were taught in Albanian in 248 schools, 6,307 students were taught in Turkish in 55 schools, and 627 were taught in Serbian in 14 schools (Statistical Yearbook of the RM, 2001). Although instruction in the primary schools remains pretty rigid and traditional, several pilot programs are sponsored by the OSI and Bishop Grossateste College in the UK, which include more interactive instructional approaches.

In public Macedonian schools, English has the status of a foreign language in the elementary and high school curriculums, together with German, French, Russian, and most recently Italian. The model is British because of the textbooks used for instruction, most of them published by the Oxford University Press, and because teachers have been trained in the use of Received Pronunciation (RP). All English teachers are Macedonian citizens and students are exposed to other English varieties through the media, so that it is questionable which variety of English they are learning.

Foreign language instruction is introduced in the 5th grade, at the age of 11, and is offered as three 45-minute classes per week. Even though English is one of several foreign languages offered, it is the most popular and widespread. Data from the State Statistical Office (2001) indicate that in the school year 1999/2000, 70% of the students in primary schools had English as their foreign language compared with 26% who had French, 2.5% Russian, and 1.3% German (Figure 1).

The Ministry of Education is trying, as an experimental measure, to introduce foreign-language education in the fourth grade. Currently only 648 fourth graders attend mandatory English and French classes, while 2,708 receive elective instruction in English, French, or German. If this approach proves feasible with regard to funding, resources, and interest, the program will expand to all elementary schools.

In those elementary schools in which a "Junior Achievement" program has been incorporated, English and Macedonian together constitute the medium of instruction in first and second grade In this program, English is introduced together with basic economic and business concepts. There are also several American elementary schools which offer education in English. These schools are attended by foreign officials' children, but the number of local children is increasing.

The last novelty in the elementary educational system is the implementation of two foreign languages, one mandatory, and the other elective. Thus, the students who have English as a mandatory foreign language choose French, German, or Russian as an elective, while most, if not all, students who have one of these foreign languages as mandatory elect English. Although English currently takes the leading position in foreign language instruction, only about 20 years ago the picture was very different. According to a study conducted by the British Council (English Teaching Profile, 1985), the situation with the four major foreign languages was as in Figure 2.

Most high schools, especially in the western region, offer bilingual education, Macedon-

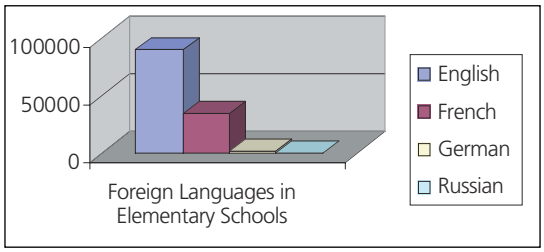


Figure 1: The distribution of foreign language learners in public elementary schools in Macedonia: Grades 4 to 8 (State Statistical Office, 2001:16)

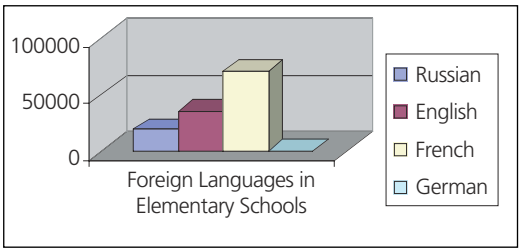


Figure 2: The distribution of foreign language learners in public elementary schools in Macedonia in the academic year of 1977/78

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ian/Albanian, Macedonian/Turkish, Albanian/Turkish. In 1999/2000, there were 74,632 high school students instructed in Macedonian in 92 schools, 14,093 in Albanian in 22 high schools, and 602 in Turkish in 4 high schools (source: the Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Macedonia XXVI, 2001).

In high schools, students continue with the foreign language they had as a subject in elementary school, except in the Gimnazia, where students learn two foreign languages, English being one of the two. Again, data from the State Statistical Office (2001) show that, whether it is the students' first or second foreign language, English is the most widespread foreign language, being studied by 77% of high school students, followed by French at 35%, German at 10%, and Russian at 6%. Cf. Figure 3.

The Ministry of Education with some help from Phare, the European Union's financial and technical program related to countries of Central and Eastern Europe, implemented English for Special Purposes (ESP) in vocational schools throughout the country, especially for those programs that prepare students for college education. In addition, in the J. B. Tito Gimnazium in Skopje there is an International Diploma Program, in which students are prepared for international exams in English. There are also several American High Schools in Skopje.

The study conducted by the British Council (English Teaching Profile, 1985) shows the following situation with the foreign language instruction in high schools in the academic year of 1977/78 (Figure 4).

At university level, English is not required for undergraduate university enrollment, as for example in China and Japan, but an increasing number of faculties incorporate English into their curricula, as a two-semester course. Only in the English Department at the Ss. [Saints] Cyril and Methodius University is English a medium of instruction in most of the courses. English literature and linguistics are taught in English, while some of the general courses attended by all students from the Faculty of Philology are taught in Macedonian.

English is in fact the most popular foreign language in the Faculty of Philology. Figure 5 shows the maintenance of this position in the last five years in terms of numbers of undergraduate students who major in and graduate from the English department (Figure 5).

Following the suggestion from OSCE minority rights commissioner Van der Stoel, the first private university in Tetovo, Macedonia, was opened in the fall of 2001. Macedonian (the official language), Albanian (the language of the largest minority), and English (the unifying language of both the ethnic groups and international professors and instructors) are the current mediums of instruction at the university.

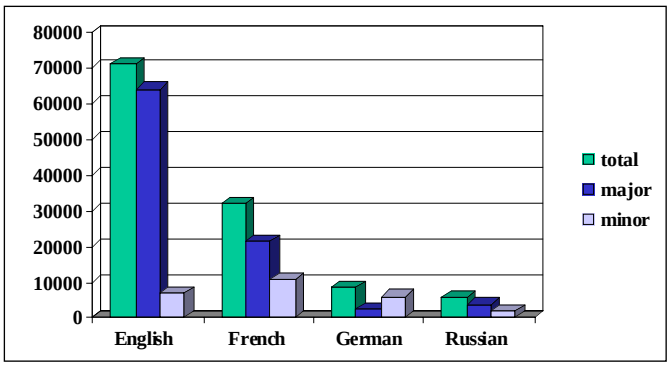


Figure 3: Distribution of Major Foreign Language Learners in Public High Schools in Macedonia (State Statistical Office Report, 2001: 31)

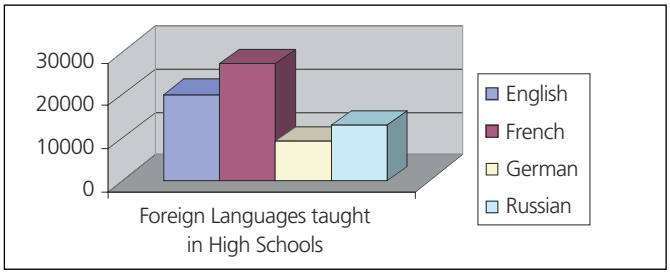


Figure 4: Distribution of Foreign Language Learners in Public High Schools in R. Macedonia in the Academic Years of 1974/75 and 1977/78

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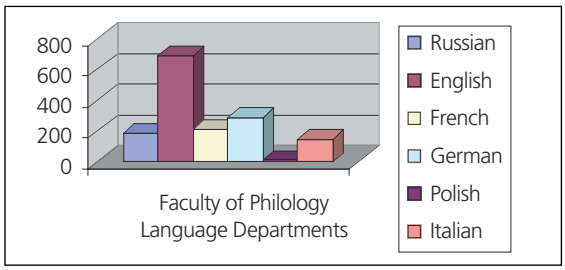


Figure 5: Numbers of enrolled and graduating students at the Faculty of Philology at Ss Cyril and Methodius University – Skopje (State Statistical Office, 2001)

English in the private schools

English is a medium of instruction in the several American elementary and high schools in Skopje. Most students in the elementary schools are the children of various international officials, but the number of Macedonian students is increasing, while in the high schools, the students are predominantly Macedonian, from different ethnic groups.

One of these schools is the American School Macedonia, which was established in August 1994 and approved by the US Department of State and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Republic of Macedonia. This school is accredited by the Northwestern Association of Schools and Colleges, and offers "American Style" education from kindergarten to 12th grade. The elementary school, up to 8th grade, is attended by 45 students, while high school instruction is offered to about 120 students. The tuition for the elementary and the high school is $3,000 per 180-day school year (American School Macedonia, 2000, http).

The Nova High School of Macedonia is "an independent co-educational language day school which offers an educational program for grades nine through twelve" (Nova, 2000, http), which uses the "University School" educational model of Nova Southeastern University and charges a tuition fee of $3,235 (Nova, 2000, http). There is an enrollment of 50 students per year in the school.

There are also private language schools, some of which are popular throughout the country because they have well-developed programs in foreign-language education, including English, German, Italian, Spanish, Macedonian for foreigners, Albanian, Turkish, Spanish, French. Since these schools are not under the Ministry of Education, or any other state educational institution, there is little central control over teachers' training and the quality of the instruction. Language schools are not accredited educational institutions and in legal terms are private businesses, except for the Centre for Foreign Languages and the Workers' University. Hence, language schools have complete freedom to decide upon their policies, curricular designs, and choices of methodology, texts, and norms.

The number of such institutions is rising because of high demand. Both students who have been assigned to other foreign languages at school and adults who need to learn English in order to keep their jobs attend courses in these private institutions. In addition, many ambitious parents send their young children to learn English so that they may become native-like speakers of the language by the time they have grown.

Teachers of English

In the last decade, most public school teachers of English have graduated from the Ss Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje and hold a bachelor's degree in English, as required by the Ministry of Education. These teachers are trained in a variety of foreign-language teaching methods and techniques and are highly proficient in English. Yet, since the demand for English teachers in some places is higher than the number of available graduates, schools are sometimes compelled to hire third- or fourth-year college students of English as teachers.

The older generation of English teachers, on the other hand, includes many who have had no more than a high school education or an associates' degree from the Teacher Training School, which does not exist any longer. In comparison with the college degree teachers, these teachers are much less proficient in English and rely on the grammar-translation method, which means they teach reading, vocabulary, and grammar.

Finally, due to the increasing interest in English among students, the number of English teachers is the highest among the foreign-

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language instructors both in elemenatry and high schools, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Numbers of Foreign Language Instructors in Public Elementary Schools in R. Macedonia (State Statistical Office Report, 2000: 16)

	1998/99	1999/2000
English	518	562
French	393	399
German	35	39
Russian	75	69
Total	1021	1069

Problems of English instruction in public schools

Although the Ministry of Education has undertaken various projects regarding the reform of the educational system, foreign-language instruction in the Macedonian public schools faces five main problems which may persist due to the lack of financial support.

1 Class size In most public schools, the number of students per class ranges from 20 to 40.

2 Pre-service and in-service teacher training These are both underdeveloped, leaving English instructors with only the basics of foreign-language teaching methodology and without concrete solutions to some of the problems they will encounter.

3 Lack of technical support Technical equipment and resources for ELT are in very short supply. Most teachers use only 'chalk and talk', because schools do not have tape recorders, let alone TVs, VCRs, computers, and other multimedia interactive programs.

4 Varied proficiency within classes This is common in public education, especially in elementary schools. Most students start learning English in local language schools at an early age, so that by the time they reach the fourth or fifth grade they are proficient in the language. Yet they attend class with students whose parents could not afford early English instruction for them in the language schools, and are therefore true beginners. English students are not placed according to proficiency but simply the grade they are attending. There have been suggestions for overcoming this problem by offering English classes in the first or second grade, but for economic reasons this is not yet attainable.

Finally, low salaries and insufficient support results in apathy among public school teachers. The number of English teachers actively engaged in professional growth is small, and consists only of ambitious and energetic teachers who have not yet become disillusioned. Indeed, we may note here that similar problems are found in EFL education in several other countries in the Balkans. Jones (1995) describes comparable conditions Croatia, and Vitanova *et al* (1993) and O'Reily (1998) discusses similar difficulties in Bulgaria: how to manage a growing need for English instruction alongside (and resulting from) a lack of standards, resources, teachers, classes, and available texts.

Resources for English learning and spread

In Macedonia there is an abundance of institutions, organizations, associations, be they national or international, whose objectives and goals entail improvement in the acquistion, teaching, and facilitating of English. These institutions serve both as resources and active disseminators of English, which indicates that they may be considered key factors in widening the ranges of functions, domains, and levels of English in the country. Hence, when describing the spread of English in Macedonia in the educational domain, it is not sufficient to describe solely the present state, but it is also important to include some of the institutionalized mechanisms which may contribute to the future progress of English in the country.

Several Macedonian, British, and American organizations are salient resources for the spread of English through language education. They include: the British Council, the English Language Teachers' Association of Macedonia (ELTAM), the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Fellowship, the English Teachers' Resource Centers, the Open Society Institute (OSI: Soros), the Peace Corps, and the embassy of the United States. These institutions and organizations support English language teaching and learning in three basic ways: teacher training and support, libraries and databases, and scholarships for studies abroad, in English-speaking countries.

Almost all the above institutions offer

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Table 2 Numbers of Foreign Language Instructors in Public High Schools (State Statistical Office Report, 2000: 32)

	1998/99	1999/2000
English	260	302
French	164	183
German	48	52
Russian	59	55
Italian	1	3
Total	532	584

teacher training workshops, seminars, and conferences. For instance, the EFL Fellowship and the British Council provide financial support for the ELTAM annual English teachers' conference, and the Peace Corps provides volunteers to work on teachers' professional development. Teachers' resource centers organize smaller scale, or more localized, workshops, but they also have libraries with professional and belletristic literature and teaching materials.

The British Council library is the biggest resource of its kind in the country. Apart from the books, the BC also promotes English summer courses in Britain and provides some scholarships for graduate students. The American Embassy and the OSI offer a much larger number of scholarships and fellowships for study and training in the US or the American universities in such neighboring countries as Greece, Bulgaria, and Hungary.

Discussion

English has been the dominant foreign language in Macedonia since around the late 1980s. Wardhaugh's 1987 statement that one factor for language spread is its use for trade and business by more powerful countries certainly relates to the situation there. The spread of English coincides with the fall of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the establishment of the independent Republic of Macedonia, which means that the socio-economic situation is one factor affecting the spread of the language, while another is educational development: almost all the most prominent work in science and technology is written in English.

English is implemented at all levels of the Macedonian educational system as well as in private language schools. Although it has never had the status of a compulsory foreign language, most students learn it. The resources for teaching and learning it may play a decisive role in the nature and the pervasiveness (cf. Cooper 1982) of the spread of English in Macedonia. It has proved popular and attractive, and it can be speculated that there are five reasons for this phenomenon:

1 Teenagers want to be part of a global teenage culture, and want to learn English in order to understand the popular music and movies.
2 The Internet and computer usage still require a knowledge of English, because so few search engines operate in Macedonian.
3 Educational stays in the US and the UK, and degrees from American and British universities and colleges, are highly valued.
5 Travel and tourism are significant, although it is currrently hard for most Macedonians to obtain entry visas for most European countries, the US, and Australia.
6 There are also, unfortunately, many Macedonians who learn English so as to be able to migrate to Australia, New Zealand, or, most recently, Canada. This certainly is a result of the current economic and political hardship in the country.

Conclusion

English is a foreign language in Macedonia, and at all levels of education it 'competes' with such other foreign languages as French, German, Russian, and Italian. Although English is not recognized as a compulsory foreign language, the statistics show that almost all students in elementary and high schools study it at some point. This phenomenon is relatively new, because in the late 1970s, French had the leading position in the numbers of students learning it in both elementary and high school.

In addition, there is an increasing number of private elementary and high schools (as well as private language schools) which use English as the medium of instruction for all courses. Students who believe that they do not receive the appropriate or enough instruction in English at school attend further classes in English at the language schools. Some language schools employ native speakers of any variety of English (who may not however be qualified EFL

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instructors) and this usually attracts more students – who believe that they will perfect their English if they are taught by, and exposed to the speech of, native speakers.

The number of students and instructors continues to grow and more language schools are opening to satisfy the growing demand. How long this mania will last, and what educators will do to meet the increasing need, remains to be seen. Certainly, at present there is no end in sight. ■

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