

Introducing an Integrative Approach for Studying Foreign Languages in Higher Education: The Case of Belgrade Faculty of Philology¹

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Abstract

After the Republic of Serbia officially adopted the principles of the Bologna Declaration in 2003, the international development of the Serbian higher education had to follow the guidelines common for all European Union countries. Abiding by the new Higher Education Law of 2005, the Faculty of Philology of the Belgrade University first started introducing gradual changes and then implemented the reformed curriculum for language learning as of the 2006/2007 academic year. The new programme of academic study includes three main domains for each of the many departments of the Faculty of Philology: Language, Literature, and Culture, but these comprise different courses, some of which are mandatory, while others are elective. For instance, in the English Department, besides the mandatory classes in Contemporary English Language, students also attend several courses in English Linguistics, Anglophone Literatures, EFL Methodology, and Cultural Studies. This paper will illustrate the introduced changes and discuss the benefits of the new, integrative approach to foreign language studies, both for students and their professors.

Keywords: Belgrade Faculty of Philology, higher education, English Department, foreign languages, Bologna Declaration, languaculture

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Introduction

Situated in the Balkans, more precisely at the crossroads of Southeast and Central Europe, the Republic of Serbia is one of the legal and recognised successor states to the former Yugoslavia (whose full name was: the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia - SFRY). Before becoming part of Yugoslavia, Serbs had several sovereign states, from as early as the Middle Ages, while the Serbian Kingdom proper was established and recognised in 1217 by both Constantinople and Rome – as two major centres of power at that time.

One of the oldest universities in the Balkans, and the oldest one in Serbia, is situated in its capital Belgrade. The University of Belgrade (in Serbian: *Univerzitet u Beogradu*, and in the Cyrillic alphabet: *Универзитет у Београду*) is also the largest Serbian higher education institution. The Republic of Serbia currently has 17 universities including 136 faculties. There are 8 public universities consisting of 85 faculties and 9 private ones consisting of 51 faculties, with the total of about 2,500 professors teaching over 200,000 students. Out of this number, about 90,000 are students at the University of Belgrade, which covers four domains (natural sciences and mathematics; medical sciences; technological sciences; and social sciences and humanities), with its 31 faculties and 11 research institutes. Currently being one of the top 400 universities in the world (according to the *Shanghai List*), the University of Belgrade is more than two centuries old, since it was founded in 1808, when its name was the Belgrade Higher School.

Under its umbrella, the first school in which *education* was taught in Serbian – the Lyceum of the Principality of Serbia, was founded in 1838. Besides several courses in the Serbian language (grammar, syntax, and stylistics), students could also opt for learning German or French, so it can be said that this was the seed from which the Faculty of Philology (*Filološki fakultet*, in Serbian, and in Cyrillic: *Филолошки факултет*) at the University of Belgrade would bloom later on. It is the oldest faculty of philology in Serbia, since it was founded in 1908, and also the largest one, with about 350 teachers and associates, plus a hundred administrative staff members. All in all, there are 31 departments, with some 8,500 students, including the Department for Librarian and Information Studies, several majors in Serbian Language and/or Literature, as well as numerous Foreign Language Departments. These are the very focus of our paper, since its aim is to analyse the introduction of an integrative approach for studying foreign languages at the Belgrade Faculty of Philology in the twenty-first century.

Implementing Reformed Curricula at the Belgrade Faculty of Philology

In Serbia, the domain of higher education is regulated by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development. Serbia is a state on its way towards the full membership in the European Union (EU), as a candidate country since 2012. Like all the other EU candidates, Serbia also had to harmonise its national laws, regulations, and standards with those of the EU, which is the accession requirement for any country before it becomes a member state. Among other documents, Serbia had to accept officially the Bologna Declaration and thus become a member of the Bologna Process, which happened in 2003. In line with the principles of this important document, Serbia adopted the new Law on Higher Education in 2005, which was the final sign that it had entered “the mainstream of change” and “of coordinated reforms” (*The Bologna Declaration*, p. 3). The entire University of Belgrade, which means the Faculty of Philology as well, started implementing the reforms in conformity with the new law, as of the following academic year – 2006/2007. The main changes introduced at the Faculty of Philology were that students had many more elective courses than before, and that besides language and literature they could study culture, too.

Namely, ever since the establishment of the Belgrade Faculty of Philology, each of its departments had been devoted to teaching the respective language, and in most cases the literature/s written in that language. For instance, until the introduction of the reformed programme, the students at the English Department had the following obligatory courses (each lasting two terms, that is, a whole year): Contemporary English Language I - IV, English Language I - IV (Phonetics, Morphology, Syntax, History of the English Language), English Literature I - IV, American Literature; and elective courses in Linguistics (Semantics or Contrastive Analysis), Literature (Shakespeare or another offered course), Methodology of Teaching, Educational Psychology, and Second Foreign Language (see more in: Rasulic and Trbojevic, 2004, pp. 208-231). In their analysis of the revised programme of academic studies at the Department of English language and literature at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade, Trbojevic, Rasulic, and Jovanovic present the background which led to introducing the changes, and point to the fact that the reform was prompted by what they name ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ developments (Trbojevic, Rasulic, and Jovanovic, 2011, p.19).

The first kind of changes were those made by the Serbian state and academic institutions, which “provided a legal and institutional frame for the reform that has long since been felt necessary” (Trbojevic, Rasulic, and Jovanovic, 2011, p. 20). They included, but were not reduced to, the enactment of the 2005 Law on Higher Education, because the role of the newly-formed National Councils for Education and Higher Education was also of great significance. The previous acceptance of the Bologna Declaration principles had an enormous impact as well, since prior to that the lack of supportive standards and reference frames had been a stumbling block for even launching the reform. That frame was rightly found in the Council of Europe’s documents: *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) and *European Language Portfolio* (ELP), as part of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which represented a huge help in harmonising our education standards with those valid in other European countries.

Another key event which greatly enhanced the reform at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade was the granting of funds by the European Commission for our Tempus IV project (for the period 2010–2013) entitled *Reforming Foreign Language Studies in Serbia* (REFLESS). The very goal of this project was implementation of EU language education policies in Serbia, as well as harmonisation of language education standards in our country with those prescribed in the CEFR and the ELP, in order to integrate Serbia into the EHEA and boost the country's further development in this domain. Among the most significant results achieved by our joint efforts within the framework of the REFLESS Tempus IV project were two publications: *Reforming Foreign Language Studies in Serbia: Towards Serbian Language Education Policy*, and *Evropski jezički portfolio za filološke studije na fakultetima u Srbiji* (the Serbian version of the ELP for foreign language students). These studies particularly helped implementing the reform not only at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade, but also at all the remaining state Philology Departments – that is, those of four other universities in Serbia (Novi Sad, Nis, Kragujevac, and Novi Pazar).

The second kind of factors that prompted our reform, which Trbojevic, Rasulic, and Jovanovic named 'bottom-up' developments (Trbojevic, Rasulic, and Jovanovic, 2011, p. 19), were the problems that mostly concerned students, on the one hand, and professors, on the other. The greatest obstacle to both successful students' accomplishment and high-quality performance of their teachers was the one already discussed above: outdated – or, as Trbojevic, Rasulic, and Jovanovic call them, 'petrified' – curricula, while most of the remaining hindrances stemmed from that core, such as: "non-selective accumulation of content material aggravating students' workload [...], formation of large groups of students 'stuck' in some courses [...], poor quality output [...], market reality and students' needs" (Trbojevic, Rasulic, and Jovanovic, 2011, p. 20-22), etc. Especially the last two factors mentioned here – 'market reality and students' needs' – were both at odds with the actual knowledge and skills they used to obtain until graduation. In the new programme, introduced in the fall of 2006, which "is not a close and fixed set of courses, but a dynamic system of mandatory and elective courses" (Trbojevic, Rasulic, and Jovanovic, 2011, p. 22), six major fields of study were defined: "The Contemporary English Language, English Linguistics, EFL Methodology and Applied English Linguistics, Translation, Anglophone Literatures and Cultural Studies" (Trbojevic, Rasulic, and Jovanovic, 2011, p. 22). Within such a flexible framework, coupled with continual evaluation, not only can students be involved more actively, but the level of their responsibility and awareness is also increased.

One of the major changes introduced during the reform at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade in the twenty-first century was the creation of courses in Cultural Studies, which had previously existed only sporadically, and not in all Departments. For instance, in the English Department already in the 1980s students had to pass the Introductory Course to English Studies (cf. Trbojevic, Rasulic, and Jovanovic, 2011, p. 25), while they also learnt about the cultural history of Great Britain and the United States within the framework of respective courses in English Literature and American Literature. Nevertheless, after the curricula were reformed, the new integrative approach made available the space for fresh, so much and so long needed independent courses in the domain of Cultural Studies: *British Studies – Introductory Course*, which is mandatory for the first-year students, *American Studies – Introductory Course*, mandatory for the second-year students, *British Cultural Studies* and

American Cultural Studies as elective courses at the fourth year of studies, and *Cultural Diversity in Modern Britain* at the MA level. The aim of these courses is to bring

the social, political and cultural history of Britain and the US closer to the students, hoping to raise awareness and appreciation of cultural features and differences which would aid our students in understanding and internalizing both the English language and Anglophone literatures (Trbojevic, Rasulic, and Jovanovic, 2011, p. 25).

Conclusion

The necessity of introducing the domain of Cultural Studies in foreign language teaching was recognised in the twenty-first century not only in Serbia, but in many other countries, as well. In their comprehensive analysis of a similar problem regarding foreign learners of the Japanese language, Xiao Yan Li and Katsuhiro Umemoto point out that “in the Japanese language education curriculum, Japanese civilization is merely an adjunct and its position is too weak” (Li and Umemoto, 2010, p. 291). Discussing numerous similarities, but also differences between studying a foreign language and learning about the cultural context in which it is spoken, they assert that

In foreign language education, the rules of grammar and vocabulary constitute explicit knowledge, which is transferred from teachers to students in a classroom. However, language cannot be used only in such an explicit context. Implicit knowledge, such as the way language is used, or its implied meaning according to time, place, and situation is also required (Li and Umemoto, 2010, p. 294).

Having ascertained that learning a foreign language *per se*, without relevant courses in Cultural Studies, is not enough for attaining the level of proficiency, they conclude the following: “In order to improve the acquisition of communication skills, we must integrate the study of both Japanese culture and language in the practice of Japanese language education” (Li and Umemoto, 2010, p. 285). Their decision, as well as the change we implemented within the framework of reforming curricula at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade by introducing courses in Cultural Studies, was based on previous research by numerous significant theoreticians worldwide.

Although before the last decade of the twentieth century foreign language departments, those at the University of Belgrade and those in numerous other countries alike, did not envisage studying cultures in their syllabi,² “the notion that language and culture are inseparable” (Li and Umemoto, 2010, p. 288) was already recognised and highlighted. The proof of this was the emergence of a specific term – *linguaculture* (or *linguaculture*) as early as in 1994, when Michael Agar, an American anthropologist, pointed to the importance of culture in learning a foreign language, in his essay *Language Shock: Understanding the Culture of Conversation*: “You can master grammar and the dictionary, but *without* culture you won't

² See more about that problem in, for instance: Robinson, 1981; Byram, 1994; Byrnes, 2002; Paige et al., 2003; Koda, 2005; Kramsch, 2011.

communicate.” (Agar, 1994, p. 29, emphasis in the original). This cultural dimension of language has further been analysed by many researchers, among them most prominently by Karen Risager, who has written extensively about the significant implications of culture and languaculture in foreign language education, which has also been the topic of this paper. Asserting “that language teaching and learning should focus on the appropriate use of the target language, oral and written, according to situational and wider social contexts” (Risager, 2005, p. 186), she draws attention to the link that should preferably exist between the study of language and cultural studies, because the one “between the study of language and the study of literature is not a natural one, it is a historical construction that was once important in the nation-building processes” (Risager, 2005, p. 194).

Regarding the future of Cultural Studies in teaching foreign languages, Li and Umemoto “predict that the integrated study of language and culture will surely become a major issue in the practice of Japanese language education” (Li and Umemoto, 2010, p. 285). In a similar way, by implementing its reformed curricula of integrated language & literature & culture studies, the Faculty of Philology at the University of Belgrade has once again proven that, although it is one of the oldest institutions of higher education in the Balkans, it is still up-to-date and on a par with the most sophisticated philological departments in the world.

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