

THE ROLE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN CYPRUS AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE ELT CLASSROOM

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the role of foreign languages, especially English, in Cypriot society. The discussion touches on a broad range of topics including the history of Cyprus, the current situation of the language and attitudes towards English. All are examined in the context of modern Cypriot culture. In the second part of this work, attitudes, motivation, achievement, communicative and cultural competence issues and their effects and implications on the English Language Teaching classroom will be expounded. In the conclusion part, solutions will be offered.

HISTORY

Cyprus had been under British rule from 1878 to 1960 and in 1925 became a Crown Colony. English was introduced as an integral part of the curriculum in the first top classes of the larger schools in 1935. (Ioannou-Georgeu, S2004 : 19). However, as the teachers were only graduates of secondary schools, this did not bring the desired results, because they lacked knowledge of language and knowledge of effective methodology. During this time of expansionist phase of Imperialism, the British power founded many schools where the medium of instruction was English, and where the emphasis was on English classes. The students who learned English would primarily function as interpreters between the British merchants and the Cypriot

merchants, which Phillipson calls the *linguistic imperialism*. When more emphasis started being placed on English and the subject was upgraded to one of the most important ones in the syllabus, English found itself in the middle of a political campaign called EOKA. During the EOKA struggle (1955-1959) the anti-British feeling had a very negative influence on the learning and teaching of English. The teaching of English at schools was seen as a British imperialistic instrument and students and parents at all levels reacted against it. (Matsangos, M: 1990:2). Some of the negative *attitudes* that will be mentioned later stem from these incidents.

In 1960, though, the situation changed. Cyprus gained its independence and became a modern state where education and foreign language became more important than ever. Due to close relations with Britain, English was chosen, and in 1956-66, it was officially part of every school syllabus. Pupils started learning English at the age of 9 until 18 years of age.

English in Primary Schools was taught by Primary school teachers with some specialisation and the text books were imported from Britain until 1984 and they were very structural. (Ioannu-Georgiu, S.2004: p28). In 1981, for the first time a National Curriculum for the teaching of English was developed. The Ministry of Education decided to have the Curriculum Development Unit write local course books. British consultants, financed by the British Council were brought in and two series of books were written , though they were very much traditional or structural. (Ioannou-Georgiu, S,2004: 28)

In 1992, the Ministry of Education developed a new curriculum, which was an effort to modernise the teaching of English with an emphasis on the principles of a communicative approach.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

First of all, it should be underlined that Cyprus is probably **one** of the very few countries where English moved from the 'Expanding Circle' to the 'Outer Circle', which is to say, English used to be a second language, but now it is used as a foreign language and as *lingua franca*. Even so, today, English is very prominent in Cyprus. As it has been compulsory in schools for decades, it is not really in a competition with other foreign languages. English as a 'second language' has still a major role in Cypriot society for, - even though English is not the official language- some government reports and a significant proportion of official and legal documents are still written in English.

Like other expanding circle countries, English is omnipresent in everyday life through the global American culture influence i.e. through the media, movies, pop music, etc. In addition, being a touristic island in the Mediterranean, English is also used to communicate with tourists. (50% of tourists are native speakers of English).

English also operates as a *lingua franca* for migrant groups of non-Greek speaking background, such as the Turkish, and for tourists who are not native speakers of English. Another important reason for learning English is that many Cypriots have family ties with Cypriot relatives in the United Kingdom, notably in London. English

is also a prestigious means of access to to universities in the UK and the US and elsewhere. Other important reasons for learning English are: careers that require English as a second language, higher education (or private schools), access to research and information and travel.

Considering all of these reasons, it is not unusual to observe a positive attitude towards learning the English language in Cyprus.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS ENGLISH

The Cypriots' attitudes towards the English language seem to be quite positive. Phillipson (1991: p.110) argues that in India, English language was regarded as a force for the 'modernizing' of the country, the purpose being to educate a class of Indians who could function as interpreters between the British colonial power and the millions of Indians they governed ' a class of persons Indian in blood, but English in taste, opinions, in morals, and in intellect', which is a degrading thought towards the Indian (Phillipson: 110). Yet, in Cyprus the situation is different. The Cypriots, who were already educated before and during the British rule, accepted English as a tool to improve –not change- their culture, knowlegde and develop their relationships with other countries. Therefore, after the EOKA struggle, the English language has never seen as a threat to their identity. Most Cypriots are very aware of the need to speak English for various reasons. According to a survey that I myself conducted, with contribution of 50 people who are aged between 18 and 30, 71% want/wanted to learn English because they think English is an access to the best universities in the world

and because easy to communicate with both native and non-native speakers of English around the world.

Attitudes towards the British and the American culture are also positive. In general, the Cypriots do not mind seeing English words in shops, restaurants, etc. On the contrary, they regard it as a sign of 'modernisation' and 'globalisation', which they appreciate a lot. In addition, there are many English loanwords that are used in their daily use of Cypriot Greek and Cypriot Turkish.

The Cypriot aim to learn the R.P (ON England ?) rather than American dialect or other varieties of English, since Cyprus has always had links with England and also because most of the resources that are used for teaching English are imported from England. In addition, according to many Cypriots the RP accent sounds more 'pleasant' and 'prestigious' than the American. Unfortunately, they are not fully aware of other dialects of English, such as the Scottish or Irish dialect.

In this century, it has become easier to reach various resources on the Internet, but still English lessons are very prominent. Due to the fact that students are obliged to take tests such as IELTS, TOEFL, The First Certificate, etc. for further education or business reasons, in the English language classroom, the emphasis is on grammar and writing, rather than receptive skills. However, according to the Language Profile of Cyprus, there has been some innovations in the curriculum which aims to develop students' communicative competence.

Finally, both parents and pupils believe that the English teachers who are native speakers of English with the RP accent are ideal for English language classroom, because (Trudgill, Hannah 2002: p.9) it is associated with particularly with the upper-middle classes. Foreigners who are very successful at acquiring an RP accent may therefore be reacted to as if they were upper-class (2002: p.9) and in this case, their chances of promotion in business or successful communication with the native speakers of the language.

ENGLISH INSTRUCTION AND LANGUAGE TEACHING POLICY IN CYPRUS

In Cyprus, a substantial proportion of teaching periods are allocated to language education, particularly in Primary schools. English as a foreign language is introduced in year 4, two periods per week. In lower-secondary schools (Gymnasium) 3.5 periods per week and 2 periods for French, as the two compulsory modern foreign languages. (Language Profile:15) According to the Ministry of Education data, about 38% of time per week is spent on English language and 24% on French.

In the Lyceum, on the other hand, English and French were both compulsory subjects until 2000. Pupils now have a choice of two from a wider range of foreign languages after the first year, i.e. English, French, German, Italian, Spanish and Turkish.

Comparing Lyceum and Gymnasium, in Gymnasium, language teaching emphasises creativity, where students are encouraged to develop their creative potential and produce novel, creative ideas and linguistic output. Although fluency is still important at the Lyceum level, the curriculum gradually shifts emphasis to accuracy so as to

cater for the learners' needs and pressures put upon them by society's demands.

However, accuracy is not allowed to inhibit communication or become a threat to shy or weak students. (Cyprus NR: 2)

Concerning methodology, teachers are expected to combine a variety of principles, techniques, processes and flexible teaching methods in a carefully reasoned student-centered manner, encouraging student initiative, promoting meaningful interaction, emphasising both fluency and accuracy, integrating the four skills.

The acquisition and promotion of listening and reading skills demand a high level of participation. For the promotion of reading comprehension skills through the use of comprehensible input covering all types of discourse corresponding to students' interests and progressing from short to more complex and extensive texts with more complex structures and content, with more demanding vocabulary.

TEACHER TRAINING

The Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus favours in-service teaching and for this purpose, it organises a year-long compulsory course conducted twice a week.

INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

The instructional TEFL text books are selected by the Ministry of Education The Selection Committee first defines the profile and needs of the target population in

view of the existing curriculum content and objectives, its underlying philosophy, etc. According to these specifications it then solicits samples of published materials directly from publishers.

HOW DOES ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AFFECT THE ACTUAL PRACTICE IN THE ELT CLASSROOM ?

‘The words, sounds, grammatical principles and the like that the language teacher tries to present are more than aspects of some linguistic code; they are integral parts of another culture. As a result, students’ attitudes towards the specific language group are bound to influence how successful they will be in incorporating aspects of that language. (Gardner, 1985: p. 6) ‘Attitude surveys provide social indicators of changing beliefs and the chances of success in policy implementation.’ (Baker, 1992: 9) As it is also mentioned in the ‘Attitudes’ section of this work, the attitudes towards the English language in Cyprus are not negative. According to the survey I conducted with the help of the book called ‘Investigating Language Attitudes’ (63-119) by using Agree/Disagree responses, the Cypriot describe English as: 75% useful, 10% dishonest, 3% modern, 2% attractive, 5% friendly and 5% N/A . Even so, the overall result shows that the Cypriot are in favour of learning and using English and consequently this affects the actual practice of the English language in the ELT classroom. Certainly, one might expect that those with favourable attitudes would be more attentive, serious, rewarded, and the like, than those with negative attitudes, but even so such attitudes might not be related to *achievement*. (Gardner, 1985: p.41). Achievement can also be gained through *instrumental* reasons (reasons which stress

the pragmatic aspects of learning the second language, without any particular interest in the language) Even so, achievement may be limited, but with positive attitudes and with what Gardner calls the *Integrative* reasons/motivation (that indicates an interest in learning the language in order to meet and communicate with member of the second language community), on the other hand, one can learn more efficiently.

One would expect that if the student is to be successful in his attempt to learn another social group's language he must be both able and willing to adopt various aspects of behaviour, including verbal behaviour, which characterize members of the other linguistic-cultural group. The learner's ethnocentric tendencies and his attitudes towards the other group are believed to determine his success in learning the new language. His motivation to learn is thought to be determined by both his attitudes and by the type or orientation he has toward learning a second language. (Lambert 1967:

102)

The 'useful' but 'dishonest' image of the English language in Cyprus probably stems from the history of Britain, especially England. Just like other colonised countries, the Cypriot are also affected by the history and consequently this shaped their attitudes towards the language and the people. It should also be noted that even though the word 'useful' suggests that, rather than *integrative*. the *instrumental attitude* is dominant. But what can be done to make English more favourable in Cyprus? Valette (1986) suggests broadening cultural goals in the foreign language classroom beyond geography and history to include four essential areas:

- 1- Developing a greater awareness of and a broader knowledge about the target culture
- 2- Acquiring a command of the etiquette of the target culture
- 3- Understanding differences between the target culture and the students' culture
- 4- And understanding the values of the target culture (1986: p.181)

Teaching materials are one of the most important factors that may affect students' attitudes and motivation, and consequently their achievement, proficiency and performance. No matter how teachers try to draw a positive image of the language, culture and the country where the language is spoken (i.e. the UK), the students' Any attitude changes are in part the result of the particular demands placed on students by the second language course because of their own cultural beliefs and expectations (Gardner, 1985, p88) Smith (1971) argues, for example, that on the first day, a student walking through the language classroom door arrives with a set of attitudes, most of which are negative. The student may feel the course is irrelevant, boring or difficult. Depending upon the student's experiences, such attitudes must either change or be reinforced. Even though the situation in Cyprus is not as negative as this example, it is better for a language teacher to keep students motivated and help them develop a more favourable attitude toward the language.

The choice of teaching materials and the information content of the lesson should correspond to the motivations of the students (Cook,2001: P. 99). In an ELT classroom which is managed by the Ministry of Education, the teachers are not totally free and they have to follow the curriculum provided. In the classroom, generally the emphasis is on grammar, with a teacher-centred attitude. The materials are imported

from England (OUP, CUP, etc.) which can be considered as ‘structural’. Considering that many students aim to study abroad, they should be able to not only read and write but also must be able to start a conversation with native or non-native speakers of English, chat with his/her fellow classmates, etc. Unfortunately, most of the ELT classes in Cyprus devoid this aspect of a language.

Another problem is that the classes are too large, which makes it more difficult to do activities, like role-playing, storytelling, watching movies, listening to music, etc. which would develop their productive skills. With undeveloped productive skills, it is highly possible that they will have difficulties while talking with native speakers of the language. Plus, it may also sound ‘rude’ if one lacks communicative competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. This will not only make them feel isolated but will also affect their business in the future. Phonetics is not taught, which is very important for language learner for it may cause misunderstanding and may even end up embarrassing the speaker. All of these problems seem to stem from either the wrongly planned curriculum or the demands of universities and other institutions who ask for certificates or examinations like The First Certificate, IELTS, GCSE’s, etc which seem to be highly structural. This factor and the pressure on the language teacher leave him/her with no option but to follow the curriculum, which aims to prepare to students to these exams or courses.

CONCLUSION

In the first place, the Language Policy and the curriculum must be reconsidered.

According to an ELT teacher that I interviewed, the curriculum does not match the

proficiency level of the students, because the Selection Committee at the Ministry of Education does not consult in-training teachers for innovations in the curriculum and this affects the quality of teaching and learning a great deal, because the ELT teachers are inspected by the Ministry of Education therefore they have to cover the present curriculum word step by step. Hence, it might be a good idea to be in contact with the ELT teachers who can observe and decide what the students really need.

Secondly, considering that most of the students will study in the UK or the USA, they had better develop their speaking abilities, and even learn slang. For, in most communities speakers' status depends on their linguistic abilities; their intelligence, personality and even value as human beings may all be judged according to their style of speaking. (Loveday: pp 179) In order to achieve this, audios, visuals and other multimedia equipments should be used more often. In addition, as both parents and students prefer, more native speaker English teachers with an RP accent might be hired so that the students can, at least hear the accent they are expected to learn, and memorise the melody of the language more efficiently. As it is mentioned before, the RP is associated with 'prestige' and 'upper-class status' and the Cypriots seem to be in favour of this accent. Even so, it may be a good idea to introduce them with other varieties of English so that they can fully understand the English-speaking world.

Concerning the culture orientation and *teacher training*, Canagarajah (1999: p.188-189) suggests that it is important to consider how existing textbooks can be used for negotiating cultures and that this can be a creative enterprise where teachers take communicative activities a few steps beyond what are prescribed in textbooks to enable students to move in and out of cultures. Especially in Cyprus, which is newly

titled as a European country, Internationalisation and European integration are challenges to foreign language education in schools. Its main challenge is to teach relevant communicative competence. Language teachers are in the key position. They should be conscious of the real essence and deep connection of language and culture both in their own and foreign cultural contexts. They should also understand the symbolic system of the target language sufficiently well to be able to guide their students to know it. The fact that culture is intertwined with language should be consciously remembered throughout language studies. (Council of Europe p.55) Of course, it is also important that the Ministry of Education takes attitude's importance seriously and make official measurements.

Finally, in order to encourage positive attitudes to foreign language learning and to speakers of foreign languages and a sympathetic approach to other cultures and civilisations. (1999:p.72) and to offer insights into the culture and civilisation of the countries where the language is spoken Byram M. and Risager, K. (1999:p73) suggest that these opportunities are given to pupils:

- 1- Work with authentic materials, including newspapers, magazines, books, films, radio and television from the countries or communities of the target language
- 2- Come into contact with native-speakers in this country and, where possible abroad
- 3- Consider their own culture and compare it with the cultures of the countries and communities where the target language is spoken

- 4- Identify with the experiences and perspectives of people in these countries and communities
- 5- Recognise cultural attitudes as expressed in language and learn the use of social conventions

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