



INNOVATIVE PRACTICES IN BULGARIAN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

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Abstract: *The innovative practices in the teaching process are part of the contemporary educational paradigm. Modern educational technologies are characterized by increased interactivity such as: cooperative learning, collaborative learning, e-learning, etc. A prerequisite of the successful language learning is the radical change in the educational interaction between the teacher and the students within the Bulgarian language lessons. The paper discusses three areas of application of innovative practices: project work, utilizing multimedia tools, application of innovative techniques and analyses the teaching of Bulgarian language in junior high schools (5th – 7th grades). The innovative approaches presented in the paper have been approved in real-life school practice and the paper analyzes their positive and negative aspects.*

Key words: *innovative practices, student, school, language, practice*

1. Introduction

In the realities of a rapidly changing social and cultural environment¹ it is crucial that the very concept of learning and education is changed. The National Qualifications Framework that has been adopted is compliant with the Recommendations of the European Parliament and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for life-long learning 1,2. The National Qualifications Framework of the Republic of Bulgaria encompasses the entire educational system with all its qualifications. It describes the knowledge, skills and competencies that the students at the different educational levels must possess. It includes 4 key competencies – personal and professional – which are of paramount importance for the individual through the various stages of his or her development. These are: autonomy and responsibility; learning competencies; communicative and social competencies; professional competencies.

The international research carried out recently shows that among all the member-states of the EU Bulgaria has the greatest percentage of students with low achievement in reading, mathematics and natural sciences (Education and Training Monitor 2015). In order to improve students' achievements a National strategy for increasing and encouraging literacy 2014-2020 (3) has been adopted. According to the UNESCO definition a functionally literate individual is able to participate in activities in which literacy is a prerequisite for the effective functioning of his or her group or community and which enables him or her to use reading, writing and arithmetic in his or her development and the development of his or her community. Functional literacy can be viewed from two perspectives: as *the application of literacy and numeracy knowledge in the every-day life* while performing various tasks (e.g., reading signs on buildings and labels on goods, interpreting the temporal and locality information on a transportation schedule, etc); or as the presence of *necessary knowledge and skills to perform certain functions*, the most important of which is the labour function

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2. Description and Results

A key period in an individual's development is adolescence and the educational process during this period is all-important as it relates to the acquisition of functional competence which in its turn guarantees the fundamental skills enabling the individual to successfully function in various social environments – at home, at school, within the professional community. Therefore, the communicative approach in education is leading not only when teaching Bulgarian language and literature. The teacher has to work in such a way, so that the students' overall literacy is stimulated as well as their reading comprehension skills. „The text has to be transformed into an object „immersed“ in a real-life context. The tasks related to it have to allow for the assessment of the adolescents' ability to cope with real-life situations. Of crucial importance is the facilitation of the educational process through the use of printed and electronic teaching resources that are varied and close to the contemporary adolescents' conception of the world.“³ This way, the students will be motivated and engaged in the educational process, and the acquisition of knowledge and skills concerning working with various types of texts will be made smoother with the use of modern technologies.

From what has been said, it becomes clear that in order to achieve new learning outcomes, it is necessary not only to reshape the subject content, but also to adjust the organisational configurations, means and teaching methods when teaching Bulgarian language at school. The paper presents three innovative pedagogical practices aimed at forming cognitive and social and emotional skills during the Bulgarian language teaching in junior high school. These pedagogical practices are based on the concept of utilising the competence approach when teaching adolescents.

1. Project work. One of the innovative approaches in contemporary language teaching. Project work combines hands-on activities of various nature. In the process of their realization knowledge, skills and attitudes for adequate reaction in various communicative situations are effectively acquired. For a Bulgarian language project to be successful, it has to achieve certain educational, instructive and cultural goals. The project incorporates content from various cultural and educational areas, and the hands-on activities motivate the student to become an active participant in the educational process. The project usually aims to arrive at the solution to a problem, and the various activities it encompasses provide situations which require from the participants to perform certain communicative roles which are very close to

those performed in real-life situations. The projects presented here have been designed in compliance with the teaching process of the Bulgarian language lessons in the 5th, 6th, and 7th grade.

The topic for the 5th graders is: „We are literate and we use the Internet rationally!“ The class is divided into three groups. The students in the first group have to conduct a survey among their classmates asking them which web site they most often use when studying their lessons. The students in the second group have to present the dangers of the Internet. The students in the third group have to find informative web sites related to their school subjects. After they have accumulated the information necessary, they design and make a poster or a presentation with a summary of the data.

The topic for the 6th graders is: „Complex verb tenses“. The goal of the project is a diagram of the complex verb tenses to be designed so that the students are able to practise and reinforce their knowledge. Through designing charts and diagrams the students not only reinforce their knowledge, but also develop skills in systematizing and summarizing tabular language information. The class is divided into three groups. The students in the first group design the diagram on cardboard using their textbook as an information source. The students in the second group design their diagram using only sources on the Internet and present it to their classmates through multimedia instruments. The students in the third group presents their diagram using a PowerPoint presentation. Juxtaposing diagrams prepared using three different sources of information reveals the level of skills the students have when working with information obtained through different channels. The students develop skills in team work, tolerance and the ability to change one's own attitudes.

The topic for the 7th graders is: „Love as a universal value.“ The poem „Inseparable“ by Pencho Slaveykov, which the students are familiar with, serves as the starting point of the project. The class is divided into four groups. The students in the first group has to find motifs similar to those in the poem in folk-tales and poems. The students in the second group have to present to the class a song (a folk-song and a contemporary one) related to the theme of love. The students in the third group investigate the presence of the motif of love in theatre. The students in the fourth group searches for art works interpreting the same theme. Finally, through a review of the motif of love presented through specimens of various art forms, created in various periods, the students come to the idea that love is a universal value. Each group that has worked on the project presents the results through a multimedia presentation (video or a PowerPoint).

They also prepare a poster which includes the most interesting results of their work.

2. Interactive multimedia instruments. In order to meet the needs of contemporary society, the educational process has to be flexible and efficient, oriented mainly towards pedagogical interaction. The integration of digital instruments such as Interactive White Boards, tablets, multimedia and Internet resources stimulates the students' interest in independently working on activities and improves their motivation to be active participants in the educational process. This ensures that the information is processed through visual channels, and is better retained and personalized. Due to the complex involvement of various sensory receptors, videoinformation is transformed into an effective learning resource.

Creating an advertisement using multimedia tools is a task suitable for the sixth graders. Apart from their language skills (when creating the advertisement), the students also develop skills in publishing and promoting event notifications on the Internet. The class is divided into three groups. The students in the first group create an advertisement announcing the establishment of a literary club. They have to supply information concerning the date and location of the opening of the club as well as the proposed activities. The students in the second group have to create an advertisement for a Christmas charity bazaar. The advertisement has to specify the cause which will be supported, as well as the date and location of the event. The students in the third group have to create an advertisement for a trip abroad. The advertisement has to specify the destination, the price and the dates of the trip.

The advertisements are published online and are assessed by the Bulgarian language teacher, the parents and the school principal.

Multimedia is used in the seventh grade in order to visualise the results of the project „Love as a universal value.“ Creating videos and PowerPoint presentations illustrating their findings while working on the project, the students develop their skills in synthesising information from various sources and presenting it in a single content container. In this way, literature knowledge acquired during Literature classes is presented via information presentation skills acquired during the Information Technology lessons.

3. Interactive techniques. The application of interactive techniques is becoming more and more pressing due to their effect on the modern educational goals. The three interactive techniques that are presented here have been developed according to the specifics of the age, knowledge levels and skills of the students, as well as in

agreement with the specifics of the subject content 4.

The technique „Language waterfall“ has been developed for use in the fifth grade. Juxtaposition and comparison are used, and the children's real-life knowledge and geography knowledge is utilised. The technique's function is to extract and summarise information on the relationships between words belonging to different categories: verbs, gerunds, adverbs for movement, participles. The class is divided into groups. One of them is the environmentalists who try to prevent the „pollution“ of the waterfall. The technical tool used is a multimedia projector. The first slide shows a video of a waterfall. The second slide – a definition of a waterfall as used in the context of Geography lessons. The third slide shows the words that will form the language waterfall. The waterfall video is played and each group is given the task to define the waterfall as a geographical phenomenon.

Each group announces its definition. The „environmentalists“ determine which of the definitions presented closest to the geographical term.

A pre-prepared slide shows the words: бързам (hurry - verb), бързане (hurry - noun), бързо (hurriedly), бързаш (hurried), бързайки (hurrying). The question: *What is the common property of these words?* aims for hinting at the idea of movement, expressed in these words that carry in their semantics the notion of movement (when the technique was tested, all the teams stated that the words shared a common radical and it was difficult for them to reach the conclusion anticipated by the teachers).

The main idea is formulated by the environmentalists – it is not only the waterfall that can move and hurry, language can also express the notion of movement through various words (not only verbs). The language waterfall is similar to the geographical one as everything in it „moves.“ The environmentalists pose the questions: what is common between a waterfall in nature and the expression „a waterfall (torrent) of words“? In nature it is *the speed and the incessancy of the water streams and their powerful downward movement*. In language it is the inability to distinguish between the words and their meanings when a waterfall (a torrent) of words overwhelms you. (When the technique was tested, the students unanimously reached the conclusion (provoked by the question: What can pollute a natural and a language waterfall?) that in nature it is waste, while in language it is insults, incorrectly or inappropriately used words.

Each team comes up with an example of a correct and incorrect collocation of the word

waterfall (during the lesson the following examples were provided: slow waterfall and a beautiful waterfall, noisy and quiet waterfall). The team that has performed their task best is awarded the position of experts for the didactic task. The suggestions are discussed and the group chosen by the students replaces the „environmentalists“ group. The experts evaluate the didactic task completion and their classmates' performance.

The didactic task is of a creative nature. Each student is given a worksheet with the following task: *You are given the words: spring, river, lake, swamp, swift current, ocean, sea, brook, stream, waterfall. Fill in the blanks in the text choosing the words that most closely correspond to your native speaker intuition. You can use other comparisons of your own choice as well.*

The technique „Language mathematics“ has been developed for the sixth graders. Language is a classic example for a system. Some language phenomena can be presented through mathematical formulas. Using some basic mathematical formulas gives the students the opportunity to re-discover the relationship between the two school subjects which are typically categorised as diametrically opposite (if you love language, you hate mathematics and vice versa).

Deduction is employed to perform the task in order to give a formal description of linguistic knowledge and relationships through the application of familiar mathematical formulas. The class is divided into groups (in small classes, or in classes comprised of students from different age groups work can be done in pairs to ensure interaction). The technique is well-suited for an exercises lesson. It develops the students' cognitive skills as they have to derive common relationships, connections and correlations between language and mathematical phenomena. Discovering language phenomena to which mathematical formulas can be applied develops the sixth graders' logical thinking. The aim of the task is for the students to discover those relationships that make language processes „visible“ through mathematical formulas. The technique activates the students basic mathematical knowledge and stimulates their interest in being „explorers.“

The technique has been tested in the sixth grade in an exercise lesson entitled: *Compound sentences*. The teacher elucidates the possibility of describing language through formulas. As an example a word is given as well as the formula that can be used to illustrate this word. The class is randomly divided into three groups: explorers (2 groups), opponents, experts.

The explorers' teams mark down the language phenomena (accompanied by examples)

that can be illustrated by the formula $a + b = c$ (compound sentence, word group, simple sentence).

The opponents set transformation tasks: 1) a formula has to be proposed for a simple sentence with non-essential clauses or phrases;

2) a formula has to be proposed for the compound sentence so that it can be distinguished from a complex sentence.

Both questions aim at provoking the explorers' teams to arrive at the formula: $a + a_1 = a$ which best describes the non-essential clauses or phrases in a simple sentence.

a (simple sentence) + a_1 (non-essential clause or phrase) = a (simple sentence).

The students proposed the coordinating conjunctions (and, but, however, neither...nor) to be placed below the + sign together with the comma.

One of the advantages of „language mathematics“ is that through the application of this alternative technique the students' curiosity is aroused regarding an aspect of language that they have been unfamiliar with so far. This technique is also suitable for use in the fifth grade when the students are taught about the morphemic structure of the word.

The technique „In the eye of the storm“ has been developed for use in the seventh grade. The term „in the eye of the storm“ is often misunderstood. The prevalent opinion is that this is the center of the storm where the winds are the most violent. In fact, the contrary is true. The eye of the storm is the area in the centre of the whirlwinds where it is quiet, clear and calm. In the „eye“ of the storm, that is in its central area, there are no atmospheric changes and the regions there are not affected by strong winds or rain. The interactive technique falls into the category of interactive methods for stimulating the cognitive and reflexive activity. It incorporates logical operations such as juxtaposition and comparison of familiar linguistic knowledge and rules which are supposed to be made sense of at a higher level. It is highly suitable for revision and summary lessons and for exercises and is organized as a competition.

This technique facilitates the reconstruction of the important characteristics of the language phenomenon through the active involvement of the students in the process of synthesising their personal experiences. The class is divided into four groups: 2 groups of competitors (each forms a separate team), a group of consultants, and a group of experts.

A source text is introduced either on the whiteboard or the multimedia projector, and each team has to transform it according to the requirements of a particular communication sphere

(media or aesthetic). The teams prepare their adaptations and each team member participates in the creation of the text. The consultants approve or edit their team's text. The experts pose identical questions to the teams. Each team answers the questions using the other team's text. The mistakes are counted and scored in a geometric sequence (each mistake after the first one „worsens“ the storm). Two diagrams are prepared (they are computer generated, but it is also possible to mark the mistakes on a flipchart) so that the mistakes of each team can be noted separately. The diagram determines the „severity“ of the storm for each team.

The experts give the teams the task to place within „the eye of the storm“ the stable characteristics of the language phenomenon (the text) and around „the eye“ to list the circumstances that can cause „the storm“, that is, to change/alter the language phenomenon.

The suggested interactive techniques do not alter the specific subject content of the lessons in Bulgarian, but they attempt to interrelate knowledge acquired in different school subject. The interactive methods make the process of knowledge acquisition more interesting and activate the students' real-life skills.

4. Conclusions

The dynamics of the digital age determines the new requirements for our contemporaries. To realize their potential and to be productive and valuable members of society, they have to acquire skills and attitudes for life-long learning. For the educational process to adequately respond to the present-day realities, it has to shift the paradigm from „knowledge-centrism“ towards acquiring competencies 5. The major characteristics of the competence acquisition approach is the development of certain skills, and not the accumulation of a certain amount of knowledge. This approach underlies Europe 2020: the European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth 6. The

improvement of the quality and practical applicability of various competencies guarantee the successful future career paths of the adolescents within the realities of a globalised society.

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