

The influence of Albanian history, politics and economy on English language teaching

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Abstract

Learning a foreign language in Albania has been determined by many historical, political and economical factors. However, there is little written material about this important feature of foreign language learning in Albania. This paper aims at informing the reader about the main phases Albanian education in general has gone through and that have led to the present state of the Albanian schools. The history of Albanian education has not been an easy one. Albania has suffered many invasions from other countries as well as the worst of dictatorships after independence and these historical features have had a very regressive impact on the development of Albanian education. Being part of the Albanian struggling for improvement of schools and education in general, English language teaching has reflected the consequences of this historical and political background. I argue that, although Albanians worshiped knowledge and education, it was often impossible for them to obtain proper education and sometimes it was unreachable for them, as dictatorship aimed at keeping people in the dark by preventing them from reading, watching, listening to any foreign material that had not been politically controlled before. Nevertheless, Albanian democratic governments have acknowledged the importance of foreign languages, especially English, and have been making continuous efforts to improve the situation of foreign language teaching in Albania in order to modernize and bring it on the same level with other Western foreign language teaching.

Keywords: *history education teaching English Albania reforms*

Introduction

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The Historical, Political and Economical Influence on English Teaching as a Foreign Language in Albania

The history of English teaching in Albanian schools has its origins relatively late (1960) compared to other European countries. This is due to many historical, political and economical conditions that have determined the path of the teaching of this language in Albania. These conditions have influenced the teaching methodology used and this influence can still be found in many English teachers' practices of today. In this section, I shall write about the Albanian history of English teaching in Albania to the present day, which will enable me to draw some conclusions about the present state of English language teaching methodology.

The development of Education in Albania¹

Educational traditions in Albania are closely linked to the history of the Albanian people. Comparative studies and archaeological data reveal that during the time of the ancient culture of Elyria, emerging in the 8th and 5th century BC a high level of civil culture developed in the 5th-1st centuries BC, which saw the establishment of the Illyrian cult buildings, stadiums,

¹ Because of a lack of sources, ISP, Institution of Pedagogical Studies, (1997) has been my main provider of information for this part.

theatres and porticoes, where cultural, educative and educational activities took place.

During the Middle Age, the cathedral churches and monasteries became learning places. Such schools existed in Durrës, Berat, Tivar, etc. Religious people played the teacher's role. Latin language was used in those schools in Middle and North Albania; and Greek language in the South.

At the time of the establishment of the Arbër Principality (12th-13th centuries) and other Albanian principalities, especially during the epoch of our national hero, Scanderbeg (1405-1468), the drafting of the historical chronicles and other documents was especially developed. Chancelleries were created, where the official documentation, the correspondence with the neighbouring countries, and the treaties with the foreign countries were elaborated, the language of which was Greek. At the same time, inside the principalities people spoke Albanian. The first documents of written Albanian belong to the 15th century. They are:

1. Formula e pagëzimit (The Baptising Formula) (1462),
2. Fjalori i udhëtarit gjerman, Arnold Fon Harf (The Vocabulary of the German Traveller, Arnold von Harf) (1469),
3. Perikopeja e Ungjillit të Pashkës (Easter Gospel) (by the end of the 15th century).

The politics of denationalisation and assimilation of the Ottoman invasion at the end of 15th century (1479) brought about a general economic and educational backwardness to the country. However, many intellectuals from the Catholic clergymen, made possible the opening of some elementary schools in Albanian, for example in Kurbin of Kruja (1632), in Perdhana and in Blinisht of Zadrima (1639). However, the ottoman authorities adopted stringent measures and closed them. Afterwards, the illegal teaching of Albanian began in the houses, churches, mosques, and tekkes. Education loving clergymen, such as Pjetër Budi, Frang Bardhi, Andrea Bogdani, Daut Boriçi, etc., prepared the necessary teaching material. Therefore, this and the following period of educational history have a religious nature.

In 17th-18th centuries, the building of medresses (Moslem middle schools) began, and an important place was given to the study of Islamic religion, Arabic language and culture as well as some elementary scientific lessons. Moreover, in the environs of the monasteries there existed schools, opened by Orthodox clergymen, which helped to achieve a general-level education of the population. The lessons in these monasteries were given only in

Greek. The culmination of this period was the establishment of 'Akademia e Re' ('New Academy') of Voskopoja (1750), which quickly became an important European centre for the development of cultural knowledge. It is in this institution that we have the beginning and a certain progress of didactic thinking.

The efforts made for the development of Albanian education and schools achieved notable intensification during the period of Albanian Renaissance National (1830, 40-1912). Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit (Albanian League of Prizren) (1878-1881) drafted the program for the official recognition of the Albanian language and school. A common alphabet of Albanian language was established and *Alfabetarja e Gjuhës Shqipe* (The alphabet of the Albanian Language) was published around that time. In 1879, an Albanian print association called 'Shoqëria e të Shtypurit të Shkronjave Shqip' was founded with its branches in Bucharest, Sophia, Egypt, etc. Thereafter, many schoolbooks were published for the Albanian schools, as well as the work of Sami Frashëri *Shqipëria Ç'ka Qënë, Ç'është e Ç'do të Bëhet* (Albania - What it was, What it is, and What it will Become), which was the design of one of the most advanced educational system of the time. In his book, Sami Frashëri writes about a comprehensive educational system that comprised elementary education (all over the country including villages), high school education (including professional schools), and higher education (including even technical branches). These examples are proof that attempts were made to establish an Albanian national school for all, regardless of religious beliefs of the people.

In 1887, the first Albanian school was established in Korça. It was a school of completely national structure and democratic (egalitarian) nature, for both boys and girls of all social strata and different religions. With the founding of 'Normale' school in Elbasan, in 1909, the first middle school of national education was established, which helped in the training of the elementary-school teachers in Albania. In Shkodra, in 1909-1910, there existed the so-called mejtëps (Islamic schools) 'Molla e Medos', 'Molla e Faslisë' (Muzeu Historik, 1999). Reforms were made for the teaching of other subjects such as arithmetic, history, geography, etc. There existed two writing systems of the Albanian language: the Arabic and Latin systems. The mejtëps (Islamic schools) were very common as indicated by the Turkish salmans until 1912, for example: in Gegëri, Toskëri, Çamëri, Kosovë, Dibër, etc.

With independence in 1912, the Albanian education and schools were organised and run by the National Government, for the first time in the Albanian history. Its educational activity focused on the establishment of

the Albanian language as an official language of the new Albanian state; the establishment of a national egalitarian content of the school; the establishment of the educational directories in the main prefectures; the compulsory elementary education of 5 years in the city, 6 years in the village, and the establishment of the normal schools for the training of teachers. These decisions were published in a governmental document called *Kanuni i Përshatshëm i Administratës Civile të Shqipërisë* (1913), which was the foundation of the Albanian educational legislation.

In January 1920, the Congress of Lushnja passed 'The fundamentals of the Albanian State', in which the Albanian Language Department was established. In the same year, the Educational Congress of Lushnja took place, which took important decisions on the nationalisation, democratisation, secularity and unification of the Albanian school. In addition, decisions on the drafting of the school documentation were taken. These efforts show that along with the difficult history of the country, Albanians have always recognized the importance of education and have always worked hard in order to position their country among the other developed European ones.

During the period 1920-39, efforts were made for organising the state based on laws and for bringing of western European legislation into Albania. This period is characterised by stability in education, the consolidation of the elementary school and the creation of the full system of middle school. During the period 1923-1929, there were established many middle schools and dormitories. In 1933, the nationalisation of schools took place. In September 1934, the law 'Mbi Organikën e Arsimit' (On the Educational Functioning) guided the Educational Reform. During this period, there were sixty thousand students studying in elementary and middle schools. During World War II, the Albanian map changed continually, depending on the battles between the fighting troops. The local Albanian administration was established in the Kosovar, Macedonian, and Montenegrin territories. Hundreds of voluntary educators went to Kosova and other regions, where the bases of national Albanian education were established. Although Albanians appreciated education and the creation of a democratic civil society, the wars were an obstacle to the development of the Albanian education. It is common knowledge that some of the most famous Albanian educated people of that time studied abroad. Due to its historical past, Albanians saw school as linked mainly to the preservation of the Albanian language, in order to survive as a nation.

After II World War (1944), the government of proletarian dictatorship was established in Albania, which went on for 45 years. A pro-soviet Education

Reform of this period was passed on August 17, 1946, which consisted of the establishment of a new educational system based on 'democratic' and socialist principles; of the radical change of the ideological and pedagogical criteria in the learning and educational process; of the content and methods based on Marxism-Leninism. It was motivated by the Russian educational system which had patriotic characteristics and of course, like many elements of the government of the time, political influence was felt throughout the educational system.

In this reform, the structures of the general 11-year education were determined. School was reduced from 13 years to 11 years, with its basic links: 4-year elementary education, 3 year unified education, and 4-year general education. The elementary school (later the 7-year school) education became obligatory by law. Education was possible for everyone, boys or girls, from town or village. In addition, schools for working adults were established.

In 1946, the first higher education school was established in Tirana 'Instituti i Lartë Pedagogjik'. In 1951, other higher education institutions were established, which served as basis for the establishment of the State University of Tirana (1957).

With the endorsement of the law 'Mbi Riorganizimin e Sistemit Arsimor' (On the Reorganisation of the Educational System) passed by the Popular Assembly of the Popular Socialist Republic of Albania June 11, 1963, the 7 year school became an obligatory 8-year school education. Consequently, all the syllabuses and teaching programs were reformed, the content of which was considerably changed by strengthening it ideologically. New subjects were introduced to the 8-year schools, such as Civil Education and Domestic Economy, whereas *productive work*² was introduced in middle schools and importance was given to the communist education of the new generation. In 1970, Instituti i Studimeve Pedagogjike or ISP (Institution of Pedagogical Studies) was established, which is now known as Instituti i Kurrikules dhe Trajnimit or IKT (Institution of Curriculum and Training). Another characteristic phase of this period is the so-called 'Further Revolutionarisation of the School', according to the law number 4624, December 24, 1969. The entire teaching and educational work was organized based on three component:

1. Teaching

² Productive work was voluntary work done by the students of elementary or high school in different fields of production, e.g. agriculture, different factories and plants, etc. It was part of the communist education of the people to love cooperative work.

2. Productive work

3. Physical and military education

The government had absolute control over school. Consequently, school was extremely politicised. From 1980 on, efforts were made for the scientific modernisation and qualitative strengthening of the pre-university education. As a result, the work focused on the modernisation of natural sciences, and major concrete work was done to improve the teaching methodology of these subjects. Some achievements were the result of pilot projects and conclusions on a national level. However, because of the socio-economic and political situation of Albania at that time, they did not have much success.

Because of the closure of the country and because of this politicised pro-soviet education, the Russian language was established in the Albanian secondary school curricula in 1948 and it continued to be taught as a foreign language for several years until the break of the Albanian-Russian friendship in 1961. During this period, Albanians were manipulated physically and mentally by the worst of dictators. Pupils did not get any knowledge of civil society or democratic values and principles at that time. The High Pedagogical Institute in Tirana had a department of Russian language and literature, which was directed by a Russian teacher, Olga Smirnova. Russian instructors also taught Russian to workers in various industrial plants of the time. Albanian students who wanted to study abroad were allowed to go to Russia and the other pro-soviet countries (Roucek, 1958: 55-60).

Since 1990, many changes have been made in the educational system. The political, economical and social revolution, which caused the downfall of the communist system and brought about the democratic changes, influenced greatly the educational field as well. The market economy and the new social situation in which the Albanian education found itself after 1990, required urgent transformations, for example:

- The elimination of the political and ideological dimension of the past system from the curricula of all levels of the pre-university educational system
- The inclusion of new subjects, such as social/civil education, medical education, human rights education, computer, etc., in the curricula of the pre-university education, which also required the new concept of the cross-curricular skills in school.
- The inclusion of new components in the curricula of pre-university education

- The modernisation of the teaching methodologies, taking a learner-centred approach and giving importance to the learner's independent and creative thinking
- The training of the teachers and directors in order to help them think contemporarily and manage the situations created by the transition
- The reduction from six to five days of lesson a week, well-suited with the new socio-economic conditions
- The improvement of the quality of the higher education curricula, through continuous study work and fundamental transformation of the content, study system, quality evaluation and the strengthening of institutional capacities

Shisalbania (2010)

The above transformations have been and continue to be important elements of the reform of the educational system in Albania.

In addition to the positive effects, such as the liberation of the school from the wardship, idealization, etc., there appeared also negative effects, a characteristic of the transition period. The dissatisfaction caused by the past regime, which pursued a completely ideological educational policy, was often demonstrated by acts of vandalism and destruction of the school buildings, which symbolised the state.

In the period 1990-1992, 5330 school institutions of different levels were burnt and damaged. 55% and 30% of the 8 year education and the pre-elementary institutions were badly damaged (ISP, 1997). Others were taken by force. This phenomenon was noticed in dormitories, production-work buildings (e.g. factories, plants, etc.), kindergartens and schools. In northern cities, many school and other state institution yards were arbitrarily seized by the ex-owners (during communist regime the real estate of the rich people was taken by the government: the buildings were turned into state institutions, e.g. schools, kindergartens, etc.; and the land was used to build other state buildings, e.g. flats, plants, etc.)

About 35% of the school buildings were constructed before 1960 and with an inappropriate building plan. Major damage was caused to the equipment of kindergartens and schools, and consequently, the achievement of general educational aims became very difficult. A great number of school textbooks could not be published in time. As a result, 70% of the 8-year school equipment and furniture is very old or is missing. This figure is 50%

for the middle schools, whereas 80% of the schools lack laboratories (ISP 1997).

The interconnection of these consequences with the other social and economic phenomena of the transition, as well as with the problems accumulated from the past, brought about the following consequences:

- In pre-elementary education, attendance was remarkably reduced because of the lack of materials and the increased unemployment of the country. During the transition years from dictatorship to democracy, its level fell from 60% to 38% of kindergarten children.
- In the obligatory 8-year education, the attendance decreased to 94% of the children of this age group, because of the very old and damaged school buildings especially in the mountainous areas, as well as various social reasons.
- In the general or professional middle education, the old content of the school curricula as well as the considerable lack of teaching material that was a characteristic of professional education made attendance fall to 42%.

The establishment of the market economy and the opening of the borders caused a massive departure of teachers for abroad. Among them, there were also very good teachers. There were difficulties also in the universities and other higher education institutions.

Higher education in Albania began in 1946, although a university is supposed to have existed in the 14th century (Engjëll Sedaj, 1999). After this year, it developed very quickly. Many higher education institutions were established in different cities, but until 1989, the University of Tirana was the only university in Albania. During the 1990-s many changes took place in higher education. The higher education institutions in the cities of Shkodër, Elbasan, Gjirokastër, which before were of a pedagogical nature, after dictatorship were given university status. Today, there exist the following state universities: the University of Tirana, the Agricultural University of Tirana, the Polytechnic University of Tirana, the University of Shkodra, the University of Korça, the University of Elbasan, the University of Gjirokaster, the University of Vlora, the Academy of Arts and the Physical Education Institution in Tirana.

Recently, efforts are being made concrete to establish new branches of study in these universities and improve the existing ones. Higher education, as well as education at other levels, was free of charge for

students until 2000. Nowadays, there is an annual fee of about 12 thousand Lekë (or about 100 Euros) for university students. Along with other European universities, Albanian Universities are going through the Bologna process, and are making fast progress towards this improved system of studies, although there is a need for quality improvement, in general, in order to meet the educational standards required by the European Union, 'the main requirement of all is an academic autonomous space free from political or state powers,' (Agenda Institute 2007).

Higher education has been the beginning of all the democratic changes in Albania. The university students of Tirana and Shkodra paved the way for the democratic changes that happened in the 1990s in Albania. They were among the first Albanians who broke in the premises of the foreign Embassies for a possibility of a better life abroad, breaking thus the iron curtain that separated Albania from the foreign world. The students who spoke foreign languages secretly informed the Albanian people about what they had read or listened to on the prohibited radio and TV channels³.

Our educational system has still a long way to go in order to be considered a modern European one. However, there exists a strong will among students, teachers and the government to achieve these standards. This is evident in the work that is being done with schoolbooks, material, equipment, curricula, as well as school building and restoration. With technological developments, new windows have opened for the students and teachers, and the classroom is beginning to change from the teacher as the only source of knowledge to a teacher-student-teacher knowledge exchange.

The way to the Albanian education of today was not easy. Unlike the education history of many other European countries, it was full of historical and political difficulties. Despite the fact that Albania is a small country and despite the lack of opportunities and conditions, its educated people have always struggled to improve the country, to achieve the best and to compete with the best.

English Language in Communist Albania – until 1990

As I mentioned in the previous section, Russian remained the main foreign language subject for more than a decade in Albanian secondary and middle

³ During communism, watching or listening to foreign TV or radio channels was banned, and the people who committed this kind of crime were imprisoned and their family were deported from their hometown and persecuted until the end of their lives.

schools. English was initially considered the language of our country's 'enemy', the lifestyle of American, English and other anti-socialist countries being criticised extensively in political and school books, newspapers or any other activities, whereas the politics of socialist countries alongside with Albania were given maximum appreciation and praise.

The opening of the American Vocational School 'Harry Fulc' in 1921, in Tirana, is important for the history of English teaching in Albania. In 1926, this school was closed, but five years of its existence provided Albanian education with very good English teachers. At that time, the English language was not taught in the Albanian schools yet, although the children of the 'high elite' had private English lessons at home. This tells us that the government and educated people of that time acknowledged the importance of the English language, but the common people did not get any English until the beginning of 1960s. The break with Russia, technological and economical development of the English speaking countries together with the Albanian government's 'need' to spy on these 'enemy' countries brought about the inclusion of English in the elementary and middle school curriculum together with the opening of some middle foreign languages schools in Tirana and Shkodër. In 1960, the first Cathedra of English Language at the University of Tirana was established (stated by Prof. Dr. Refik Kadija in 2010, ex-professor at the University of Tirana, English Branch, in an interview about English language teaching in Albania). It took five years to open the Foreign Languages School of Tirana (in 1965) with three languages English, French, and Russian, and two decades to open it in Shkodër (in 1981) (which was a former pedagogical school) and Elbasan (in 1982) with two departments, English and French. The first generations of teachers graduated from these schools were allowed to teach English at 9-year elementary school level immediately after graduation from this school. This development brought great progress in foreign language teaching of the western languages, English being the most wanted one.

English began to be taught alongside with Russian and, later on, French in many Albanian schools as the friendly relationship between Albania and Russia began to deteriorate. There were new schools built where only English was taught as a foreign language. At the beginning, there were only a limited number of English teachers, and as a result, the English classes were not available for all the students of the school. In general, within one school, some classes were assigned to have English and the others were assigned to have either Russian or French. English language teaching was

so welcomed that many parents changed the school of their children if they knew that their children were to be taught Russian or French at school, as the students were not allowed to choose the language they preferred. I myself remember that at my 8-year school, where only English was taught to 11-year-old pupils at least since 1978, pupils from other schools were registered only to change the language they were taught at their schools, French or Russian, into English by studying English for one year at my school. When they returned to their own school, they continued to be taught the language they were taught the previous year, i.e. English.

Later on, with the graduation of the young generations of English teachers from the English department of the University of Tirana (after 1964), as well as with the other graduates from the foreign language schools of Tirana and Shkodra, who were given the right to teach at 18 years old, after 4 years of English language study, English language teaching entered a boom period. It was quickly made the most required foreign language at every school in the city, and afterwards, even in the villages. More and more pupils and students were asking to learn and improve their English. The English teachers who had the possibility taught 'secret' private courses at home, although private work was prohibited by law.

The state of English language teaching until 1990 was as follows:

- **Textbooks** were excessively controlled and politicised; old, uninteresting, traditionally oriented, the texts were not taken from real life, they were generally invented or adapted to suit the political system. Even when the textbook writers had to include literary texts, they were either translated from Albanian authors or very carefully chosen from the foreign authors in order to show only the bad side of the western world and greatness of communism or socialism. For example, in an English textbook meant to be taught at the fourth year of high school 'English 4' there is a text entitled 'What life means to me' adapted from Jack London (1987: 44) and a question about the text says: 'How does the author characterize the ruthless exploitation of the poor by the capitalists?'
- **Teachers** had little teaching experience and no other teaching material but the school textbooks; they generally followed their favourite teacher model when teaching, they had no way of being in touch with the new approaches of language teaching, no English radio or TV channel, and few literature books in the libraries. The teacher was the centre of the teaching, what he/she said was the 'law' for the students.

- **Students** used to sit in class listening passively to the teacher. They were always told exactly what to do and how to do it. After an explicit monologue presentation by the teacher they were overstrained by generally being made to study and then cross-examined on the language learned by heart (vocabulary, spelling, grammar rules, pronunciation, etc.), repeating like parrots what was on their poorly designed and uncommunicative textbooks, leaving them with nothing to think about, create or explore but some mechanical transformation exercises.

Nevertheless, learning a foreign language like English opened a new window for the Albanians. It was impossible to read Shakespeare's works, nor any other European or American writer's works and not learn something from them.

English Language in Post-communist Albania – after 1990s

Albanian pre-university education did not receive the attention of the Ministry of Education in the period from 1992 until 2004. However, with the coming of democracy and the opening to the world (1990), a new era began for the teaching of foreign languages.

As far as English language teaching is concerned, (Seferaj 2009:11) states that teachers were 'highly influenced by [...] previous learning experiences and the model of the teacher-expert'. The teacher was the centre of the English classes, English lessons were taught mainly in Albanian 'gave a primary focus to grammar in [...] teaching by presenting the material outlined in the book as well as asking [...] students to do related grammar/vocabulary exercises'(ibid.). He adds that the teacher-centred methodology was very convenient for new teachers such as him, for they had knowledge of 'thousands of English words and hundreds of grammar rules, but had little teaching experience and inadequate linguistic preparation.' However, current approaches to foreign language teaching such as 'collaborative learning' and 'learner-centred' approaches have been the aim of educational reforms and international collaboration of Albanian democratic governments.

To this end, Albanian authorities are trying to enable the changes within the system by gradually shifting responsibilities to teachers/schools, reviewing syllabi and textbooks to accommodate new teaching ideologies, piloting new learner-centred approaches throughout the country, etc.

Moreover, several agreements with international partners have been reached to train Albanian EFL teachers free of charge.

(ibid.12)

New techniques of language learning to choose from, new approaches to language teaching, new technology to use, countless literature books, cassettes and new motivation to study foreign languages confronted the Albanian teacher and student. According to Seferaj (*ibid.*), Albanian teachers were required to change their teaching practice and philosophy by developing 'new Western-style Daily Lesson Plans', which besides teaching objectives include also detailed 'students' learning goals [...], minimal and maximal learning objectives (to involve a greater number of students in the process of learning), lesson procedures (including real-world materials to accompany the material presented in the text in order to generate students' interest), lesson descriptions (focusing on the level of the class and teacher's previous experiences), means of evaluation, etc.' Albanian authorities expect that by reflecting on their teaching practice the teachers will take a more western point of view toward the English language. Traditional teaching began to lose ground with the introduction of the new textbooks which promote a more learner-centred approach.

Nevertheless, not all teachers felt the same about the new situation they found themselves in. Seferaj (*ibid.*) points out that 'little is done to help Albanian EFL teachers understand why they do what they do'. The reality is that the majority of Albanian teachers have had no theoretical or practical communicative language teaching experience during either their university studies or their insufficient teacher training sessions. As a result, they have almost no knowledge of communicative language teaching and/or its underlying principles, in order to apply it effectively to their teaching practice. Traditional language/grammar teaching, thus, influences the Albanian teachers' beliefs and it is hard for them to move to another more modern Western approach 'if adequate support and training opportunities are not institutionally provided' (*ibid.*). Highly motivated teachers grasped the new ideas of teaching and some of them continued to use them in their classrooms. Despite these developments, the core of English language teaching remained thoroughly traditional.

Conclusions

Albanian history has had a negative impact on Albanian education. The wars and later on 50 years of communism and socialism did not allow Albanians to be educated like their European neighbours. Although

Albanians worshiped knowledge and education, it was often impossible for them to obtain proper education and sometimes it was unreachable for them, as dictatorship aimed at keeping people in the dark by preventing them from reading, watching, listening to any foreign material that had not been politically controlled before.

The Albanian Ministry of Education did not give immediate attention to pre-university education in the post-communist period. Although, democratic changes within the country and the contact with other countries influenced the teaching of foreign languages at some degree, the traditional approach continues to influence the English language teaching of today.

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