

Teaching Foreign Languages in Former Soviet Space - 21st Century Georgian Practice

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Abstract

This presentation aims to present research on new approaches, methodology, challenges and achievements of teaching foreign languages in post-Soviet Union space in the period of the 21st century. The opening part will present issues related to teaching foreign languages in Soviet Union space and the core topics for discussion are key issues related to teaching in general in what are now former Soviet countries and more specifically in 21st century Georgia. Research will be concluded with discussion on the following: Russian language was dominant in Soviet times and the process of teaching foreign languages was in fact regulated by the centralized government; handbooks were unified and loaded with Soviet ideology; the population had low motivation for studying and utilizing foreign languages. In the former Soviet Union space and especially in the 21st century, motivation for studying foreign languages has increased; adapted handbooks for teaching foreign languages are based on American and European practices; effective methodology of teaching approved in many countries became widely spread in Georgia; school- and university-level education in Georgia still requires amendments to the methodology. However, it's worth mentioning that the practice of private tutorship has been developing in the country recently; dominance in terms of frequency of teaching and studying is English (which has in fact become a sort of second language for the young generation), followed by Russian, German, French, Italian, Turkish, Greek and others. The Republic of Georgia in the 21st century has a demonstrated rapid growth of demand in studying foreign languages which also causes improvement of criteria for the educational system.

Keywords: Teaching Foreign Languages, Former Soviet Space, Georgia

Introduction

Before we move on to discussing the trends and contemporary situation, one shall brief on the history of teaching foreign languages in Georgia. Georgia is a country with a diverse and rich history. It is located in the South Caucasus region and has its own language, which is part of the Ibero-Caucasian language group. In general, this group is very interesting and diverse in terms of linguistics; it has quite difficult grammar categories and rich phonetics. For example, the Caucasian accent creates consonants which are in every Caucasian language and are hard to pronounce for people who are not speakers of these respective languages.

Georgian is the only language from this group which has its own alphabet. This alphabet has been changing through centuries and at this stage we have all three types of Georgian alphabet. These are Asomtavruli, Nuskhuri, and Mkhedruli.

The very first literature work (Martyrdom of Shushanik) goes back to the 5th century. However, introduction to this work informs that some facts are used from literature works produced before that unfortunately are unavailable now.

Besides centuries of writing history of Georgia, language and instruction of languages had a very big importance in Georgia; for example, literature work ("The Vita of Grigol Khandzteli", year 951) going back to the 10th century, demonstrates that religious leaders spoke a number of languages. Historical documents also inform us that Georgian kings and nobility also knew foreign languages.

Throughout centuries, knowledge of foreign languages was a sign of being an educated person; however, times changed and priorities were also differing; for example, during the 12th century, Greek language was the priority, during middle ages, it was Persian, and in the 18th and 19th centuries, Russian and French languages took the lead.

During the 20th century, English and German languages slowly entered the educational and public arena; however, during these times, Russian remained as the most important foreign language. Soviet officials did their best to portray Russian not as a foreign language but a native one for the Soviet citizens. It's worth mentioning that for Georgians, Russian always remained and still is a foreign language.

Background

Teaching Foreign Languages in Soviet Georgia

"In the period of 1921-1990, the education system of Georgia was purely dependent on those decisions and directions that were provided by respective officials from Moscow to their Georgian counterparts. The reasoning for that were educational programs, plans and the vast majority of school books that were centralized and then adapted, "translated" to respective local languages of member republics. Teaching foreign languages in most of the cases was pre-defined and pre-planned by the central authority. The central committee of the Soviet party adopted a decree in 1933 setting forth that a decision on creating unified "stable" schoolbooks which, by its nature, would ensure that a unified and joint study process would be carried out throughout the Soviet Union. For instance, from the year of 1940, those English and German language schoolbooks that were printed in Tbilisi would be a reflection of those versions that were developed in Moscow, on a central level." (Mindandze, 2006, pp 38-41).

In those respective times, schoolbooks would be developed with an influence of translation-grammar methodology and, thus, would pay a significant amount of time to teaching issues related to grammar aspects along with translation. We shall also mention that the

educational system used during the Soviet times would be perceived in most of the cases primarily as a source for ideological upbringing of the younger generation; the latter aimed at upbringing of a “Soviet Citizen,” the best portrayal of pressure from this ideology could be identified among study topics.

That is why foreign language handbooks would have specific content such as agriculture and economics and would also portray the life of pioneers, Soviet Union activists, and soviet heroes, as well as text reflecting soviet states’ lives. Such content indeed had an impact on beneficiaries. In the course of the Soviet Union, issues along with methodology of foreign language instruction require further and comprehensive study; however, in frames of general study, one could assert that, besides absence of relevant theoretical principles and not limited to obvious reasons for teaching language – neither schools, nor higher academic institutions in the Soviet Union could carry its obligations in the way it was supposed to; there could be few reasons identified in this regard:

Centralized study programs and plans; lessons that were more in compliance with the Soviet aspirations; grammar and vocabulary has a dominant role in study programs; paying less attention to speaking skills; these study programs would absolutely ignore listening skills; low motivation of students which was caused by those texts and vocabulary full of pre-defined ideology and texts and etc. (Mindadze, 2006).

Beyond all of these processes, it’s worth mentioning that the Soviet educational policy served as a tool for positioning Russian as a native language for the Soviet citizens. Casework was carried out in the Russian language and so was TV and media in general. Russian was a common language for communication and various efforts were made to weaken national languages. A clear demonstration of this argument is the 70s of the previous century, when there was an attempt to change the constitution, including in Georgia. In 1978, based on the new version of the constitution, the Georgian language was doomed to become abolished as a state language – this also meant that secondary and higher education in Georgia would have been Russian, thus Georgian would be harmed.

Students in Georgia went against this idea and there were some very large protest actions organized, which was also the largest one in the history of Georgia and also the one that didn’t result in people being killed. Basically, the Georgian language’s status was kept as a national one in the constitution; a special monument was also placed in Georgia and special day was also marked in the calendar; we still celebrate this day as an official state celebration. Back then, Georgian students really demonstrated their power to the huge Empire, which in fact entered Afghanistan very soon with forces; it also threatened Poland with just another intrusion. If we discuss more, in 1978, protest actions turned into national movement and it resulted in regaining independence in 1989.

Therefore, teaching the Russian language was a priority in Soviet Georgia; there were other manuals and handbooks in the Soviet Union and the same ones were used in every member country. Books were full of Soviet ideology and usage of these languages was limited because of closed spaces and borders. Because of this factor, teaching foreign languages was not a priority. The teaching process mostly covered translation and grammar manners.

Methods of Research

Foreign languages in Contemporary Georgia

The situation in contemporary Georgia is relatively different: after Georgia became independent, Russian language and literature received fewer classroom hours. However, Russian still remained as a leading foreign language which was taught to school pupils. Russian still kept its privilege since its literature was also taught along with a language, because this was not the case with English, German, French and other languages.

Such reality existed in the 1990s and one can assert that such development is partially a result of the Soviet path or incumbent government's foreign or internal priorities. The core aspect for announcing Russian and the compulsory foreign language was the fact that after the collapse of the Soviet Union – Georgia became part of the Union of Independent States. It shall be noted that Russian was taught from third grade only at specialized schools, where other languages such as German, English and French were also taught in a comprehensive manner and from second grade. All these foreign languages were still taught with old Soviet programs and guidebooks (Gusharashvili, 2014).

Major changes in the educational system started from the year of 2000. Based on the national action plan, instruction of foreign languages were very important. Changes to the methodology were mostly related to improving communication skills.

According to the decision of 2001, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages became a valid system in regards to foreign languages.

The latter document really affected teaching-instructing languages not only in Europe, but also in the whole world.

From 2006, national study plans were supposed to be in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and with standards it has set. It also sets which level of instruction it has to be in compliance with basic, beginner and intermediate language levels. (Sikharulidze, 2012).

Georgia, which is the member state of the Council of Europe, demonstrates a high percentage of foreign language fluency, therefore the educational plan in the schools of Georgia sets knowledge as few (two-three) foreign languages as a priority of the European framework.

In 2005, foreign language became an option in Georgia; from 2010, the first foreign language was English. Pupils are able to select a foreign language from the 7th grade that is also in compliance with an option of selectiveness.

There are few resources of teaching languages, such as public schools and universities; also, private tutors and international language study centers are becoming increasingly popular. However, private tutors are indeed the most popular.

Due to the fact that the University education has the long-lasting history and wide resources, we are going to present more widely.

Instruction of Foreign Languages at Universities

What is the history of instruction of foreign languages at higher education institutes of Georgia? The first higher education institute, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, was established in 1918 in Georgia. The latter higher education institute has the biggest experience of the instruction of languages. Through the years, the most famous scientists and specialists instructed Georgian languages (Arnold Chiqobava, Simon Kaukhchishvili, Giorgi Tsereteli and the others). Initially, the directions of Iberian-Caucasian languages, classical philology and Oriental studies was established. Instruction of English, German, French and Russian has a

history of decades. Currently Tbilisi State University represents the biggest resource in terms of the instruction of foreign languages among Georgian higher education institutes, particularly the following directions are functioning at the Humanities Faculty of University: Caucasian Studies, Orientalology, Classical Philology, Byzantine Studies, Modern Greek Studies, Western European Languages and Literature, Slavic, American Studies, Instruction–Scientific Institute of Scandinavian Studies, Japanese Language and Culture Centre, Centre of Polish Studies, Centre of Jewish Studies, Centre of the Ukrainian Studies, and Centre of Turkish Culture. Instruction is being conducted on three levels (Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral - BA, MA, PhD at the majority of the mentioned centers. English Philology is in the highest demand (popular) in terms of the number of students; it's followed by German, French, Italian, and Greek philologies. One of the lowest demands is on the instruction of Caucasian languages.

In the period of the Soviet Union, special attention was paid to instruction of the Russian language. Therefore, we see the department of Russian philology not only at the Tbilisi State University. For instance, the history of Russian studies of Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University counts more than seven decades. Instruction of the Russian language commenced from the period of the foundation of Batumi Institute in 1935. In 1938, the department of Russian language was established; it was reorganized several times through the years, it was functioning together with the department of Russian literature or independently.

In the period of the Soviet Union, Russian was considered to be a basic or second language in all spheres in Georgia. The same situation was at higher education institutes, there existed not only directions of Russian philology, but also Russian sections of almost all specialties, the same approach prevailed at secondary schools – separately Georgian and Russian schools. Children and young people with Georgian nationality studied at these schools and institutes. In the 1950-60s studying in the Russian sector was regarded as prestigious and was very popular. Later on, from the 1970s, when the national movement started to become active, the popularity of the Russian language lost its strength gradually, especially after 1978 when the authority of that time revealed its intention to cancel the status of the state language of Georgia from the Soviet Constitution of Georgia. Then huge protests of Georgian students, which were very dangerous and rare in the conditions of the Soviet regime, prevented the realization of the latter initiative. These events increased a desire to protect the Georgian language, especially among Georgian young people. Considerable parts of our respondents involved in the research indicate that a big contingent of pupils who studied in Russian sectors at schools shifted in the Georgian sector that time.

German, English and French languages approximately with the same load were instructed at schools and higher education institutes during the Soviet regime. A majority of the respondents of our survey consider that the German language was the most popular after the Russian language in the conditions of the Soviet regime in Georgia and most of the people studied this language as a foreign language at schools and higher education institutes.

What are the conditions currently in terms of instruction of foreign languages at higher education institutes? Nowadays, 31 authorized universities (higher education institutes which implement three levels of higher education programs and scientific researches) are functioning in the country according to the official data of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia. We studied the educational programs of the mentioned universities and their resources in terms of instruction of foreign languages.

In the 2015-2016 academic years, 15 higher education institutes from the acting authorized 31 state and private universities have special instruction programs of foreign

languages. Most of the universities where instruction-scientific institutes or departments of foreign languages don't exist have specialized profiles, such as Tbilisi State Medical University, Shota Rustaveli Theatre and Film University, Tbilisi Vano Sarajishvili State Conservatory, Agricultural University of Georgia, Apolon Kutateladze Tbilisi State Arts Academy, Georgian Technical University, Georgian Aviation University and etc.

The universities where instruction of foreign languages is conducted:

100 % - section of English philology;

40 % - direction of German philology;

40 % - direction of Russian (or Slavic) philology;

33 % - direction of French philology;

26 % - direction of Oriental languages (Arabic, Persian, Turkish);

20 % - direction of Turkish philology.

It should be noted that Turkish is often joined with the direction of the instruction of Oriental Languages, In such case if we combine directions of Turkish Philology and Oriental languages where Turkish is instructed thoroughly as a foreign language - then the share of the instruction of Turkish at higher education institutions of Georgia reaches 40%;

20% offer Greek studies (*NeoGreek*);

13% - Italian Philology.

It should be noted with regards to the instruction of Caucasian languages, the Georgian language is representative of the respective linguistic family; Georgia is the part of the South Caucasus. Abkhazian language is one of the Caucasian languages; Abkhazian is the second state language after Georgian according to the Constitution of Georgia. Unfortunately, the share of instruction or studying of these languages is close to minimum at higher educational institutions in Georgia.

Less than 10% of universities instruct the other foreign languages. The following programs exist.

Prioritized foreign languages:

Research of educational programs of universities would have been enough in order to determine which is the most important foreign language in Georgia today, most of the higher education institutions have a program of English Philology; English takes the first place according to the number of students studying in Bachelor, Master and Doctoral programs of foreign languages.

It is possible to determine the priority languages by means of assessment of the statistics of Unified National Exams of Georgia except the university environment. The exams have been held in Georgia since 2005 and it's permitted to enter accredited higher education institute only after passing the mentioned Unified National Exams.

LEPL NAEC- National Assessment and Examination Center of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia manages the process of Unified National Exams.

Below is given the chart of the statistics data showing the changing number of registered junior high school students from year to year at the entrance exam of foreign language.

Unified National Exams - 2005-2015				
Year	Number of registered junior high school students			
	English	German	French	Russian
2005	16560	5266	1426	6805
2006	18226	4842	1221	7610
2007	23290	5246	1212	8702
2008	14820	2078	488	5729
2009	17001	3439	917	6561
2010	21926	3340	859	7354
2011	21854	2723	697	6504
2012	23746	2641	664	5438
2013	28979	2333	447	7525
2014	25269	1539	312	6455
2015	29117	1422	266	7413

Data is authorized by LEPL NAEC- National Assessment and Examination Center.

Another survey, which was conducted in order to determine a priority foreign language in Georgia, was related to open employment vacancies. We studied available vacancies on the largest employment websites of Georgia: www.jobs.ge and www.hr.gov.ge. We divided them into 3 main categories: vacancies in the state / public sector, jobs, vacancies in private sector and vacancies in international organizations and non-governmental sectors. We surveyed vacant positions separately for managers and lower-level officials in each of the above mentioned sectors. Results are as follows:

In the private sector (average summed data are presented only):

English language knowledge is mandatory according to the qualification requirements of 80% of vacancies;

40% is mandatory to have knowledge of two foreign languages: English and Russian;

10% is mandatory to know the Russian language only.

In the state/public sector (average summed data are presented only);

English language knowledge is mandatory according to the qualification requirements of 50% of vacancies;

50% is mandatory to have knowledge of two foreign languages: English and Russian;

10% is preferable to have knowledge of any other foreign languages (German, French, etc.)

International organizations and non-governmental sectors (average summed data are presented only);

Knowledge of English language is mandatory according to the qualification requirements of 90% of vacancies;

30% is mandatory to have knowledge of two foreign languages: English and Russian;

10% is mandatory to have knowledge of any other foreign languages (German, French, etc.)

Findings and Conclusions

Our survey enables us to come up with the following conclusions:

The greatest resource and experience of instruction of foreign languages exist at the Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University;

The greatest share of instruction of foreign languages comes from the state universities; however, there are private universities, where diverse resources of language instruction exist, for example, at the program of Bachelor's degree of International Relations at Free University. Arabic, Persian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Turkish, French, Spanish and German languages are instructed at the Institute of Asia and Africa;

The program of English philology can be found at all universities where foreign languages are instructed; only the English language program is instructed in some universities;

The English philology program still remains the most popular and in high demand at universities where only English philology is available and at universities where other languages are accessible too, the next positions are occupied by the German, Slavic, French, Oriental, Greek and other languages;

Foreign languages are instructed mainly at the Faculty of Humanities;

Based on statistics in regards to entry exams at the higher academic institutions:

English represents the foreign language which is in the highest demand and priority in Georgia;

The biggest portion of high school juniors choose English as a foreign language while passing university entry exams;

Demand on English language is growing annually, while demand on other European languages (French and German) is reduced;

Russian is the second language being in high demand after English. Popularity of the latter languages neither increased nor decreased, according to the number of registered high school juniors respectively; demand on Russian is stably medium after the English language.

Based on the obtained data that is in accordance with opening vacancies with employment opportunities, one can assert that, English language is a priority for all sectors of the employment market, and the next is the Russian language. Knowledge of foreign languages is in higher demand in International organizations and the private sector. Knowledge of foreign language is mostly demanded on managerial positions.

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