

Who's to be taught in today's classroom?

Edina Špago-Ćumurija, Džemal Špago and Adi Maslo

Faculty of Humanities

Department of English Language

Džemal Bijedić University of Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Contact: edina@unmo.ba , dzemal.spago@unmo.ba, adi.maslo@unmo.ba

Abstract

Teachers need to rethink their roles and competences when approaching the most challenging aspects in the new inclusion school system in Herzegovina-Neretva(HN) Canton: teacher training, IT support, and creativity, a necessity for final implementation of educational reform. The authors conducted a poll of forty-seven elementary and high-school English teachers from HN Canton. Through a practical exchange of experience with these English teachers, this paper brings a new perspective to the current situation in the English classroom in HN Canton, namely: IT competences of teachers, motivation of both teachers and students, teaching methodology and techniques used in the classroom, lifelong learning aspect, (non)existence of infrastructural and material support in their schools, etc., with an emphasis on the teachers' perspective of all these aspects of work.

Who's to be taught in today's classroom?

The nature of communication by young people requires new communication strategies of teachers and students in today's classroom. New technologies, social networks, and speech communities shape the way youth communicates, compelling teachers to rethink their roles and "update their status" in the classroom. Knowing that teaching foreign languages means teaching communicative competence and social knowledge, teachers must learn about the new identities of their students, shaped in a new, IT – supported society and virtual world of the internet. Such a world creates novel learning habits and techniques by students,

forcing teachers to adjust their own identities in the classroom in order to establish good communication, teaching opportunities, and learning channels with their students.

Across the EU, different regions prove to be at a different level of IT usage: e.g. Austria has a new strategy – *efit21 – digital agenda for education, culture and art*, and digital competence is a learning outcome in its primary and secondary schools. In Denmark, 78.8% of students use computers in school and 39% of population between 18 and 64 years have high IT skills; in Finland this percentage is 43% in the year of 2011 (Rethinking Education, 2012). However, when it comes to some countries in the region, such as Bulgaria which entered the EU in 2007, the results are not so optimistic, due to their teaching methodology and very low share of people with high IT skills (11%)(Ibid). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, 27% of elementary schools and 37% of high schools still have no computers, and 57% of elementary and 30% of high schools lack internet access (zpravicoobrazovanje.ba) with no plan for any systematic advancement in this field.

Modern Technology use in the classroom

Today, the term *generation gap* implies mostly *technology gap*, keeping in mind the way of life of today's *internet generation*. Just like in the economy, a lack of technology-related knowledge and skills in an educational system can affect success of its participants, especially teachers and their students.

Numerous scholars wrote about the influence of modern technologies on the very nature of communication and knowledge. Crystal stated that the Internet would change the way we think eventually (2001); Lyotard wrote about new nature of knowledge which loses its *use-value* but becomes rather a form of value that is to be *exchanged* (1979). In the early 1960s, McLuhan coined the term *global village*, a term illustrating the

nature of modern communication. Throughout the world, these facts have been recognized and integrated into official strategic documents and guidelines in order *to rethink* education to fit the new needs and demands of modern society.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) today, recent historical developments resulting in a complex political and education situation based primarily on ethnic principles, together with global trends and new technologies, several practical issues emerged for those concerned with education of new generation of young people in this country. Bosnia and Herzegovina still faces the divides between global and local, modern and traditional, and (multi)national and European values. In addition, there is a visible discrepancy between the formal, strategic orientation of the state authorities and a true commitment to application of these values and activities. In such a context, schools must cope with new challenges in order to preserve their role as trustworthy partners in our society.

Competences for the future

In order for an educational system to be successful, it must first have competent teachers. There are several European documents defining the role of teachers, with the main competences: *working with others*, *working with knowledge, technology and information*, and *working with and in society*, (Common European Principles, 2010). Also, explaining the *new rhythm* to which the world is moving, European documents emphasize importance of lifelong learning, innovation and creativity (European Ambassadors, 2009).

Bosnia and Herzegovina adopts European documents related to new education standards, but it is very difficult to measure and evaluate the level of their implementation. In 2010, the Center for Policy and Governance in Sarajevo produced a Study on Creativity and Innovativeness in BiH education, stating that in Bosnia and Herzegovina there is no strategic commitment to creativity and innovation in schools,

education has not reached satisfactory quality standards, the new nine-year elementary education is more expensive but not more effective, and finally, that the results of the reforms and new initiatives are not being measured or analyzed (2010). In such a society, the role of teachers becomes even more important, since there is no systematic approach for solving of new educational challenges. Currently, BiH society is *educationally challenged*.

Foreign language teachers in Bosnia and Herzegovina

As Bowers says, nobody can really explain what happens or what today's communication really is. People are easily confused in real world communication. Internet is not like TV or radio or any of the old media. *Nowness* becomes important, as opposed to reflection and knowledge which are becoming old fashioned (Bowers, 2006). Children do not have to learn these new ways of communication because they have been born in this context. However, their teachers can find it difficult to use these new technologies, since they were educated in a completely different system in which factual knowledge and academic ability were praised above all.

English teachers have a special place in this discussion; this paper investigates their role in today's BiH society. In a country with three main ethnic groups and several other self-recognized minority groups, the inclusive education is, at least formally, being implemented. Due to their multi-cultural world view, English teachers deserve special attention in observing the existing education system.

Methods

Forty-seven English teachers who currently work in elementary and high schools in Herzegovina-Neretva Canton were surveyed regarding the use of technology in the classroom and their teaching style. Teachers responded on a 10 point scale with 10 being “strongly agree” and 0/1 being “strongly disagree”. The research was done in cooperation with the King Fahd Cultural Center and the Pedagogical Institute of Mostar, in January 2013. Sample questions included.

Results and Discussion

According to the results obtained in our research, English teachers in Herzegovina-Neretva Canton are well-aware of the need to harness online tools in their classes. Namely, 89% of those who participated in this study believe that the use of the internet in teaching would increase student motivation and make classes more interesting and productive. Most of them would introduce positive changes into their way of teaching, and develop professionally (6.4¹). Although they are mainly computer literate (6.4) and most of them use computers on a daily basis (82%), the vast majority (93%) believe that their students are more computer savvy than the teachers. Still, when asked about *how familiar they are with the new communication code of young people*, the answer was very positive (with a mean value of 8.1).

However, when it comes to the current use of online tools in teaching, the results are less promising. The respondents are not convinced that their schools have necessary resources for incorporating online tools into teaching (5.0), and they rated their current use in teaching with 4.6. One of the possible reasons is the fact that the syllabus generally does not foresee the use of online resources in English classes; 73% of the

¹ on a scale 1-10, 10 being the top value

respondents implied that it would be difficult to incorporate internet resources into classroom practice without modifying the syllabus.

The most interesting data collected revealed that most respondents agree with the view that the current way of teaching is generally good (78%), which is at odds with their view of student motivation and limited use of internet resources in teaching. Next, quite a few respondents (43%) do not object to teaching their students the way they were taught by their elementary and high school teachers. These numbers are discouraging and may indicate a lack of real desire to introduce substantial changes that would meet the needs of the *internet generation* of students. Finally, 82% of them have access to a projector at school, which brings into question their prior claims of lacking the necessary resources to start using IT in class extensively. Moreover, those who do and those who do not have access to a projector rated equally (non)existence of infrastructural support for the use of IT in class (5.0).

Computer literacy does not have a significant impact on how much teachers use online resources in classrooms. Namely, 23 respondents who rated their computer literacy with 10 (excellent) use online tools in teaching only slightly more than the others (4.6 vs 4.4).

Another interesting finding is that those teachers who believe it is difficult to employ online tools in teaching without first modifying the syllabus actually use them more than those who think it is not necessary.² Years of service play no role when it comes to the current use of IT in class.

²12 respondents who think it is not necessary to modify the syllabus rated their use of IT in class with 4.4, while 35 who think the syllabus should be modified first rated their current use of IT with 4.6.

Motivation of English teachers and their students in schools in HN Canton

As noted earlier, a successful education system is predicated on competent teachers who must be highly motivated in order to successfully do their job. According to the results that we obtained, English teachers in Herzegovina-Neretva Canton generally enjoy doing their job (6.6), but most of them (73%) think they are not motivated enough because they are underpaid. After all, it seems that money does not play a key role when it comes to enjoying their job – 34 respondents who are not motivated enough because they are underpaid enjoy their job just as much as the remaining 13 who do not complain about being underpaid. However, it seems that teachers are more concerned about money the longer they work, which can be seen from their accepting the statement that they are not motivated enough because they are underpaid (0 – 4 years of service: 62%; 5 – 10: 76%; over 10: 87%). Regardless of how long they work, they equally enjoy doing their job (all 3 groups: 6.6), which indicates that they do not lose interest in teaching.

As for their view of students, they evaluated motivation of their students with only 4.4, an inadvertent warning that the current way of teaching should be changed. In spite of this, as noted above, the respondents (78%) are generally happy with the way classes are currently conducted.

Teaching techniques and creative potential of English teachers in HN Canton

In order to discover the most common teaching techniques, our English teachers were given a list of 40 activities³ and asked to choose the three most commonly used ones. The top three activities were *role play*, *playing language games*, and *using flashcards*. Activities that did not

³Based on an idea from Barry Jones, Homerton College, Cambridge

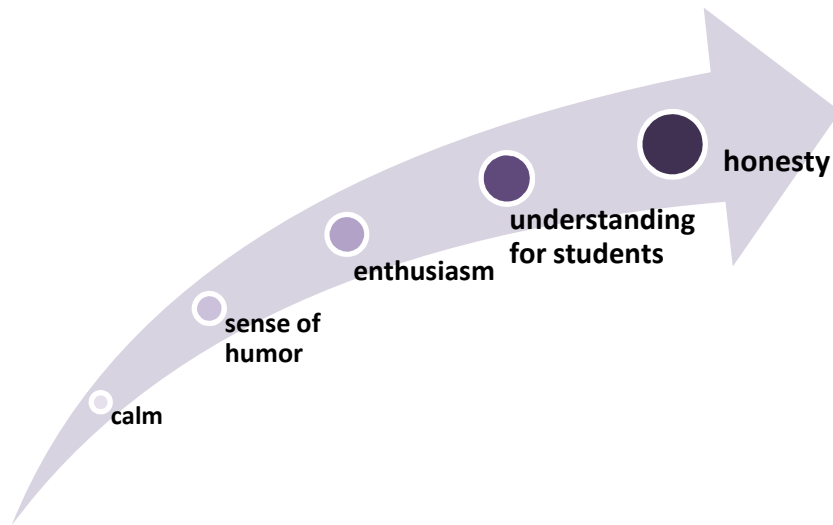
receive any attention were: *learning phrases by heart, copying down vocabulary, learning lists of words, and learning grammar rules in English*. This ranking indicates that our teachers do understand the students' creative environment, avoid outdated teaching activities, and emphasize more immersive ones.

The teachers were also given a question on *usage of different methods of knowledge delivery*, and their mean value was 8.1. In general, respondents think that the range of class activities is on a satisfactory level.

According to the existing data, the characteristics positively correlated with student motivation and success are predominantly related to teachers' personality rather than their professional skills: *understanding, just, humorous* (Havelka, 2000; Suzic: 2000), *kind, natural, cheerful, humorous, honest, sociable, neutral, objective* (Radovanović, 1997), *kindness, cheerfulness, friendly mood, sense of humor, enthusiasm, understanding for students' needs, support and concern for students, collaboration, teacher knows the subject, consistency* (Evans, McFarland, Bernard, and Kierstead 1972, 1988, as quoted in Bjekic, 1999). A study in Croatia similarly revealed that interest in school decreases with age and that in the course of time, students would like to improve quality of their relationship with teachers (Relja, 2006).

In our research, rather surprisingly, personal characteristics that appeal more to students i.e. enthusiasm, sense of humor, and calmness showed to be of less importance to and less practiced by teachers:

Figure 1. Teachers' self perception



Life-long learning and teaching of English

Our respondents rely mostly on non-formal and informal education in the form of courses, trainings, and workshops (61.7%). On a more negative note, none of them subscribed to a professional journal, they are not members of any teachers' associations, and only seven read a methodological journal on a regular basis or look for methodological information on the web.

The mean value in teachers' answers to the question on their *general knowledge* – reached 7.8. Also, they evaluated their *cooperation with colleagues and students* with a very high mean value of 8.8.

When it comes to introducing new methods of teaching, English teachers in HN Canton are not very eager to take the initiative. While only 10 of our respondents are ready to introduce changes into their teaching practice on their own, most of them (71.8%) would be willing to do so only if supported by their schools.

Conclusions

In HN Canton, there is no systematic approach or external support to English teachers in elementary and high schools, leaving them on their own to introduce something new into their classes. Consequently, the role of teachers becomes even more important.

Discrepancy plagues the teachers' perception of the existing situation. While they believe that the current way of teaching is generally good, they do not think that their students are well-motivated. Although teachers are aware of the fact that something must be changed, they are generally reluctant to take the initiative. Finally, the use of online resources in class remains low, even among those teachers who have necessary infrastructural support.

Having in mind all the findings stated above, can we say who is to be taught in today's classroom? Our teachers recognize the continual process of change in communication between teachers and students, realize the need for IT support in the classroom, and are aware of the lack of institutional strategy. At the same time, they seem to be satisfied with their overall approach and results in the classroom, even though they do not share essential values attached to effective teachers with their students. While students want cheerful, calm, and caring teachers with senses of humor, our teachers fail to exhibit these qualities in spite of them being the most significant and proactive factor in our education system and the society in general. This is due to the non-existence of an appropriate system that would provide material and technical support, training and education programs, as well as a systematic analysis and follow-up of all activities in the educational sector. Future research should investigate who should help English teachers to rethink their roles.

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