Globalization and the Arabic Language Acquisition

Oleg REDKIN
Laboratory for Analysis and Modeling of Social Processes,
St. Petersburg State University,
11, Universitetskaya emb.
St. Petersburg, 199034, Russia
o.redkin@spbu.ru

and

Olga BERNIKOVA
Laboratory for Analysis and Modeling of Social Processes,
St. Petersburg State University,
11, Universitetskaya emb.
St. Petersburg, 199034, Russia
o.bernikova@spbu.ru

ABSTRACT

Modern world is characterized by changes in every sphere of life and language teaching is among them. Language is a unique communicative system and may be considered not as pure linguistic but also as social phenomenon. Language itself is inseparable part of a certain national culture and understanding of it or integration into it presupposes knowledge of the along with national language at least one foreign language. It also requires understanding of codes and norms, and culture code switching does not mean only changing the language code but changing the entire mindset of students.

In the case of Arabic traditional methods of teaching give path to new ones and it is necessary to keep balance between innovative and old methodologies. It should be mentioned that traditional Arabic national teaching strategies, terminology, methodologies differ from these ones in use in American or European universities.

The ultimate goal is to close the gap between what students are taught in class and what they are expected to have and what they need. Globalization brings both challenges and opportunities so all of them should be taken into consideration.

The paper defines the most appropriate approaches to Arabic teaching in present day globalized world.

Keywords: Globalization, Arabic, teaching, language acquisition.

1. INTRODUCTION

For several decades now globalization poses challenges and opportunities in every aspect of everyday life. It is not surprising that it has been in the focus of attention of politicians, businessmen, scholars and teachers. It also changed the entire picture of education worldwide. Globalization in every aspect of everyday life is primarily performed through language, which is the main tool of communication [1]. The current article considers factors which affect language acquisition learning and teaching in the case of Arabic in the multinational and multilingual environment, as well as highlights new opportunities and restrictions in foreign language teaching on the example of Arabic in the context of globalization.

2. SOCIOLINGUISTIC FACTORS

Language is a unique communicative system of society and may be considered not as pure linguistic but also as social phenomenon. Development of language on the eve of civilization improved the level of contacts within the social groups of prehistoric hunters and signified appearance of the first local networks of communication. Group vernaculars were among the major markers of identification in dichotomy opposition 'us' vs. 'them'.

Today the world witnesses the rise of multinational political and economic institutions, introduction of
new means of communication and transportation. Modern civilization is characterized by mobility of population, accompanied by expansion and close encounters of different cultures and languages overlapping political and territorial borders, which means that the so called 'cultural and language privacy' is no longer respected and the language itself has changed and we witness appearance of completely new type of language of Internet communication, social networks, chats, and e-mails.

The exchange of ideas and information, as well as increased labor force mobility makes language skills among the important factors of one's competitiveness in the global market. Foreign language learning has become an important segment of education in modern society and is no longer considered as privilege of a few but as a necessity for many.

Along with a number of effects (environmental, technological, employment, standards of living, etc.) which it brings, globalization means that "world is getting into identical culture that is understood by every nation", and "we may call it intermixing of the cultures"[2]. The language itself is bound up with the very mentality of its speaker, his (or her) culture, memories images.

Since language is inseparable part of a certain national culture and understanding of it or integration into it presupposes knowledge of at least the national language along with that one considered to be language of international communication (for example, English). It also requires understanding of codes and norms and culture code switching [3]. So internationalization does not necessary level differences but brings diversity and as C.Kramsch states "... each language presents a unique study in local particularity, starting with its unique grammar right up to its unique literature" [4].

It is commonly accepted that after the WWII English has acquired the status of the global language, and to a great degree has become the language of business, finance, politics and science and at the first glance the answer to the question 'which foreign language is better to learn' seems to be clear. However, other modern languages besides English are acquiring the growing importance, and Arabic is among them.

From a chronological perspective Arabic played important role compared with that of Latin and it was the language of technology, finance and science. Besides that and what is more important it was the language of the rapidly spreading religion - Islam. Arabic words and terminology have been borrowed by another languages and the process goes on. Such words of Arabic origin as shaurma, kuskus, etc. are well known to almost every average European or American.

Currently the knowledge of Arabic is necessary for everyone engaged in Islamic studies, history of the Middle East and Mediterranean not talking about those study economy, modern politics and migrations in this region. Today Arabic is one of the official languages of UN and one of the most commonly spoken in the world.

At the same time the Arabic speaking region of the modern Middle East has become one of the nerve knots of global politics, economy and finance, military and humanitarian affairs. The current renaissance of Arabic outside the Arab world to some extent may be compared with that one during the first decades of the spread of Islam, although it takes place in quite different political and social circumstances and technological environment. Its knowledge in many cases is vital for specialists working in many fields of science and culture, as well as it is important in everyday life. All of these pose new challenges both for teachers and students.

3. NATIVE LANGUAGE VS. FOREIGN LANGUAGE

One of the problems related to foreign language education is the character of difference between language acquisition of bilinguals and foreign regular second language learning. In other words the question is: why is language acquisition so easy and natural for bilingual speakers and it poses so many difficulties for students? Judging from our long-term experience of teaching Arabic as a foreign language and taking into consideration results of recent researches and publications[5] we believe that children's language acquisition goes along with the process of building the picture of their world, and as E.Bialystok notes "these influences are not confined to the linguistic domain ... but extend as well to non verbal cognitive abilities" [6], where their real and virtual environment is described in terms of their mother tongue (tongues).

On the contrary, while studying foreign language students are focused on denotative meanings of words with the reference on word meanings in their native language, although words in different languages have different semantic fields which may coincide only partly or be completely different, i.e.
they may convey different connotations beyond their pure linguistic meanings.

It is commonly accepted that while interpreting and evaluating foreign text (written or oral alike) students rely on pure linguistic analysis. But in fact unconsciously they also rely on perceptions and evaluations of their environment described in terms of their native language and previous experience of their own. As a result, they often face contradiction and conflict between the foreign language and their native tongue realities not only in grammar, vocabulary and phonetics but also its conceptions bound together with the realities of everyday life. They also find out that understanding each and every word does not necessary give correct interpretation of an entire sentence or text and that intended concepts and meanings in fact may lead to misunderstanding of partners in cross-cultural communication.

People are used to interpret the environment through the language and by means of their language. Interpretations of the social and natural environment through language dimensions may vary in different cultures since personal mentality is nothing but a set of customs and traditions, habits and perceptions, evaluations and criteria, described and characterized in terms of the native language.

It is easier for English native speaker to study Spanish or French and vice versa than to learn Arabic. It is not only due to the differences in grammar and vocabulary and phonetics but also because of diversities in word meanings. These difficulties in Arabic acquisition may be also explained by differences in the linguistic denotation of the outer world, expressed by means of certain language.

Acknowledging such cultural differences and varieties means not only switching from one language to another but transition from one culture to another and it goes not only about changing the language code but the entire mindset of students. Globalization from one hand may level these differences and make students to be aware of them from the other.

4. WHAT TO STUDY AND HOW TO TEACH

In the case of the Arabic teaching academic mobility, availability and diversity of information resources - data bases, textbooks, dictionaries, digital collections allow compression of time and space [7], economy of energy and human resources, lift limitations imposed by traditional teaching methodologies. Thus traditional methods of teaching give path to new ones and it is necessary to keep balance between innovative methodologies and the old ones as well as to define criteria of selection of teaching books, texts and other materials, lessons structure and classroom equipment.

Language learning is more than acquisition of linguistic inventory (vocabulary, set of phonemes and morphemes), algorithms of derivation and flection, and words sequence in the linear structure. It is also their practical implementation with regard to certain social environment and conditions. Today language courses are available at universities around the globe, on-line and on a spot among native speakers environment, which provide students with linguistic, social and cultural competences simultaneously. Only this approach could be effective in cross-cultural communication which is inseparable part of globalization.

Modern means of communications (satellite TV, electronic mass media, social networks, etc.) could create artificial native speakers environment in classroom. The current model of foreign language acquisition in globalized world should consider all the mentioned opportunities available now. Information and Communication Technologies and new media-impact on Arabic acquisition as a supplement to traditional face-to-face learning have already proved their effectiveness [8].

It is well known that the Modern Standard Arabic which is taught at universities differs a lot from colloquial Arabic - the language of everyday communication that may be practiced on the spot in the middle of the natural environment. Since the global system of teaching Arabic has not such opportunities similar to these provided by educational institutions worldwide (Goethe Institute for studying German, British Council for English, Institute Français for French, Russian cultural centers for Russian, etc.) the students have to spend their extra time and money for study abroad in order to enrich their competences of communicative skills. There are dozens of summer language schools and courses that offer Arabic language around the world but only few of them provide with necessary services and knowledge of linguistic competences. The reason lies in the teaching strategies, terminology, methodologies which often differ from these ones in use in American or European universities.

The problem could be partly solved by inviting native language speakers, but in many respects their
teaching materials and methodologies often proved to be ineffective.

The common goal is to close the gap between what students are taught in class and what they are expected to have and what is vital for their practical needs in the future. It makes it necessary to revise current language programs and curricula in terms of their effectiveness in the light of globalization and not only to adopt innovative ways of studying but to combine them with the old ones that have proved to be effective though many generations.

5. CONCLUSIONS

1. Globalization makes word picture more diverse and complicated due to exchange of ideas and conceptions and language learning enriches flows of new and often vital information.

2. Arabic language acquisition along with the simply linguistic competences also requires knowledge of the entire set of cultural, historical and environmental realities which are character to native speakers. Arabic teachers have to take into consideration gender and age of the targeted audience, their motivation, as well as to choose correct methodology and equipment and in wider sense - to take into account sociolinguistic peculiarities of the language and its speakers.

3. Language learning is rewarding since it offers new possibilities and contacts and enriches modern world vision.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors acknowledge Saint-Petersburg State University (Russia) for a research grant 2.37.175.2014.

7. REFERENCES


