Armenian Language Teaching: Methodology and Difficulties

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The multifaceted problem of a successful reintegration of returnees consists of significant contributions in three major areas of life, namely socio-economic, psychological and cultural as well as educational aspects. As these areas are often interrelated with each sphere depending on the others, it is impossible to separate them from each other.

A successful and sustainable cultural and educational adaptation to the returnee's new-old home country can only be done in collaboration with family and school. In this case, the adaptation center can play a catalytic role.

Armenian Language Lessons

Our project includes two different Armenian language courses, one for those who have acquired Armenian as their native language (as well as the language of their education) and another option for people who learn the Armenian language as a second language, but would rather speak another native language.

The Learning Group

The participants of the language courses primarily consists of families, who mostly left Armenia and lived abroad for several (2-6) years. Several of these families returned to Armenia one or two years ago, and went through the first period of adaptation independently. In the consequence, the learning group is rather heterogeneous, both in issues of age (with participants between 5 and 21 years of age) as well as language proficiency. Some of the participating families live outside of Yerevan which has make it more difficult for them to visit the center twice a week or to bring children to the lessons.

For the participating minors as well as their parents, Armenian is the first and primarily spoken language. Even during the years spent abroad, the language spoken in private was mainly Armenian. Only one of the participants does not use Armenian is not the first language. We teach him with the program "Armenian as the second language". The involved Children have basically no communication problems with the Armenian language.
in everyday life. Additionally, almost all of them went to Armenian schools before their departure and upon arrival. Therefore, they also have at least basic levels of reading comprehension and writing skills. However, serious problems in the knowledge of grammar in compliance with the school curriculum are very common among our students. As a consequence, one of the main concerns of parents and children alike, is to meet the requirements of the school curriculum and in the future of final secondary school exams and thus allow for a better integration in the educational sector as well as a better access to the labour market after they finish their education.

**Language Education**

In the context of the language policies of the Council of Europe, language education is considered in two aspects. On the one hand, the language is a subject of education in itself, on the other hand however, it is also a necessary mean of studying other subjects. In our case, we can only possibly provide the first of these two options, hoping that the newly acquired language skills of our students will also contribute to their study of other subjects by their own volition.

**Armenian Language Course Planning**

According to the language needs of the participants two variants of language courses were planned:

1. **Armenian as the Language of Education**

Participants in these courses are the children who were in Armenian schools before departure and upon arrival. They are fluent in Armenian at the household level and primarily need Armenian language lessons to improve their school success. For them, the course aims to develop reading and writing skills, knowledge of the grammatical structure of the language and socio-cultural knowledge.
2. Armenian as the second language

Participants in these courses are the children who did not receive education in Armenian. For them, the course is aimed at improving communication skills in general as well as socio-cultural knowledge.

How were the groups formed?

The primary sorting mechanism for the two groups was based on age and language proficiency.

The first group

This group includes children of the senior classes, two of them had to pass primary school exams in summer. After five months of training, they successfully passed their final exams in Armenian and Russian languages.

The second group

This group identified children of upper elementary school and junior high school. In this group, a major challenge is the development of reading skills. We hope that after some time we can start a course of grammar with them.

The third group

The group includes preschool children and children in elementary school. Here, the main problems are alphabetization and reading technique. In this group we have also included a sixth-grade pupil, who went to a Bulgarian school for five years. He did not know Armenian letters, although he was verbally fluent in Armenian. After three months of learning, he gained fluency in reading Armenian. He is in the second class of the Armenian school, and he had problems with Armenian as a language of education.
The fourth group

The group identified the participants for which the Armenian language is not the first language. Here, the main emphasis is on learning the language as the means of communication.

Methods of organizing courses and language learning

- Communicative methods of organizing classes
- Language classes
- These lessons are mostly done in the first group, with the students who are preparing for school exams.
- Reading Lessons with follow-up discussions of the read materials
- The lessons were conducted in the second group. Children read and discussed various literary texts. Here the focus was on the development of skills, word recognition, comprehension of texts, the forming their own opinions, as well as writing skills.
- In the third group, the emphasis was laid on the development of oral communication skills and writing techniques.

Computer game lessons

A computer program "Playing in Armenian" is used, which gives the option of using computer games. These have the benefit of making the learning process more playful and therefore more attractive by combining study and play. This method stimulates motivation especially for the younger students and effectively combines linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge. Another positive aspect has been the development skills of self-learning as the students continue to learn at home using the program which also provides immediate feedback and thus promotes self-control and self-esteem.

Lessons in the Museum (for all groups)

The most important factor in cultural and educational integration of children of returnees is to introduce them to the history and cultural heritage of the Armenian people. For this purpose, the implemented museum lessons introduce the students to the history and
culture of their country and helps to form an understanding and respect for their homeland, its values, history and background. This respect for their Armenian heritage contributes to the self-esteem of children and supports the development of a cultural identity, which helps the students to become bearers of the socio-cultural structures and traditions of Armenian people.

Museums classes were held at:

- the Matenadaran (Institute and Museum of Ancient Manuscripts);
- the Museum of History of Yerevan;
- the Historical and Archaeological Museum "Erebuni";
- the Historical and Archaeological Museum "Metsamor";
- the monument "Sardarapat" in honor of the national liberation battle;
- the National Museum of Ethnography and the national liberation struggle;
- a number of monasteries in the spiritual center of the Armenian Apostolic Church of Echmiadzin (Cathedral Church of St. Hripsimeh, St. Gayane and St. Shoghakat);
- the treasury named after Alex and Marie Manoogians and
- the temple of "Zvartnots".
Features of the organization of museum lessons

The preparation before the excursion of each planned trip consists of a teaching unit including a presentation or film, as well as a discussion within the learning group about the expectations of the students. During the excursion, professional guides led the learning groups and offered additional input at Metsamor, Sardarapat, Echmiadzin and Zvartnots; in other cases, such as Museum of History of Yerevan, a quiz was used as an additional tasks. Discussions of the seen exhibitions and monuments also form a significant part of the activities. After the tour, the students are provided with special texts about the monument or museum. Both the materials and the experiences during the trip are then discussed in class as well.

Organization of national holidays

An important element of the cultural and educational program is the organization of national or traditional festivals. The purpose of these activities is not only the transmission of information about Armenian holidays traditions and customs, but also the process of familiarizing the participants with these events by combining these rituals, traditions, customs, national cuisine with the everyday life of the students. We have celebrated Christmas, New Year and Easter with the children and their families.

Challenges and Prospects

During the first months of our work, we identified a number of problems and difficulties:

*Instability of the Groups*

Due to the fact that the return is an ongoing and lengthy process, the formed groups gradually changes frequently, which hampers progress in the group and increase the differences of the language skills at hand.
The age of students

The project involves members of different ages (from 5 to 21 years). Dividing all these students into more homogeneous age brackets, lead to a number of very small groups, each including only one to three pupils.

Residence of the participants

As many participants live outside of Yerevan, they are forced to come to the center in Yerevan after school to attend several classes and consequently can only home late at night after the classes.

Different Proficiency Levels

Due to the very different biographies and previous education, the concrete language skills of the students vary widely. This can hamper the implementation of the language classes, as it is difficult to come up with materials and units which are not too difficult for the lesser proficient students but also do not under-challenge the more experienced ones.

Different goals and motives of language learning

Beginning with an effort to master the spoken language up to the wish to pass final exams at school, the objectives of the students may also vary significantly.