

Standard Albanian and its dialects in schools

Rezana Vrap

Language and Literature Faculty, Tirana University & National Agency of Exams, Ministry of Education and Sports
Tirana, Albania

Abstract

One of education's duties in Albania is to ensure that everybody can communicate as freely as possible with the surrounding world.

For a few decades, through teaching it has long been tried to lecture the standard Albanian language as efficiently as possible. However, on most occasions it has achieved little if any results at all.

However, linguists agree that Standard Albanian cannot be better than its dialects. It was not introduced because it was something beautiful, correct, and charming; it is a form of the Albanian language which becomes standard after it codifies the way how the beautiful and powerful speaks its mind.

One of the point of this writing is how would it possible to guide language teachers between the standard and non-standard in schools? I'm trying to support the idea that studying the language may need to start with the one that is brought into classrooms by children themselves. Teachers should help students to notice the differences between their own language and the one taught in schools, not to exclude their own dialects, but to learn how to keep a balance between the two systems. Another way is by making students realize how the tradition of dialects has enriched our language. A teacher would know how to deal with various forms of language, patterns of style within dialects, depending on typical situations. They would try and give a rational explanation of the facts and only then students would realize the true function and value of having to master and put to good use standard language in society.

Keywords: education, communicate, education's duties, Albania

Introduction

A language is a rather complex system used as a means of expression and communication. We speak to one – another, read scripts written by someone else as well as writing to others. And that is because we master the same system for encoding and decoding information. An irreplaceable role nowadays, when communication has expanded beyond recognition and in various forms, is also played by standard language. It is through this means that we are understood by the entire Albanian audience. One of education's duties in Albania is to ensure that everybody goes through a common experience, which would allow them communicating as freely as possible with the surrounding world.

For a few decades, through teaching it has long been tried to lecture the standard Albanian language as efficiently as possible. However, on most occasions it has achieved little if any results at all. The majority of average-level teachers continue to consider the language, supported by descriptive grammar and often boring textbooks, as “positive”, while the non-standard language of each student in class, regardless how imaginative, spicy or useful it may be, as “bad language”. A constant mistake is the belief that the standard Albanian forms are better versions; more logical, more accurate, more articulate under the communication of objective reality. However, on the other hand, linguists agree that Standard Albanian cannot be better than its dialects. It was not introduced because it was something beautiful, correct, and charming; it is a form of the Albanian language which

becomes standard after it codifies the way how the beautiful and powerful speaks its mind. Therefore, it is utterly wrong, mischievous even, misusing standard Albanian as superior to other dialects.

Language teaching is considerably different to other academic disciplines, as a language is deeply rooted in one's identity and that of the whole society. Therefore, every teacher has to find a fine balance in giving each student the right to manage the power of language and the affirmation of individual expressions of this power. Another argument functioning as an aid to respecting various forms of Albanian is the study of literature. Dialects are essential in studying the Albanian literature as there is a long tradition of Albanian writers using dialect forms to express everything they have witnessed, imagined or experienced, as well as truths about their surroundings, its people and the times they lived in. Without having to put their names on a list, as the list studied in all pre-university curriculums is rather long, I would argue that every teacher has to wonder how open they are to more unfamiliar forms of language. What way are they helping students find a voice of their own and not end up imitating what they are told in a classroom?

My point is not about ignoring the standard and “teaching” children their own dialects. All that intentional learning starts with what students already know and the study of the Albanian literature needs to be related to their personal experiences with language. Therefore, it is more meaningful to teach our children what a dialect is, what standard language is, as an

alternative and a common useful dialect, whose forms they are supposed to master.

But how would it possible to guide language teachers between the standard and non-standard in schools? The crucial point is that studying the language may need to start with the one that is brought into classrooms by children themselves; otherwise the efforts made to teach the standard would end in failure. Teachers should help students notice the differences that there are between their own language and the one taught in schools, not to exclude their own dialects, but to learn how to keep a balance between the two systems. Another way is by making students realize how the tradition of dialects has enriched our language. The study of the Albanian literature makes it crystal clear that in every dialect there are speakers who use the language in its most excellent form, as well as many others who use it at its poorest. How sad it is that the vagueness in a traditional grammar style in our schools has resulted to so much uncertainty amongst teachers, who often find themselves insecure, or incompetent even in teaching the standard, and therefore confused when treating controversial issues related to dialects in schools. And how ironic is the fact that many students, who use the language very dynamically outside schools, sit silently within their borders, with a noticeable lack of will of exploring a linguistic territory which they often perceive as a minefield. We need to balance our mission of teaching the standard with respecting a student's own language, and at the same time remain open to the various powerful forms of Albanian when trying to deliver deeply thought and original ideas.

If there ever existed a tension between a democratic impulse; making everyone's voice heard and an authoritarian one; urging a standard form of Albanian, we need to understand that this tension is not a conflict that requires a solution, but a source of creative and constructive possibilities, in which colorful experiences of dialect research serve as a precursor of mastering standard Albanian.

How does the reality of standard Albanian appear nowadays?

Small nations' languages, influenced by globalization, find it hard to cope, their prestige wearing out, the vocabulary becomes poorer, the amount of expression means, most of which are samples, lessens. This has had a general impact in the Albanian language, its varieties and especially the spoken standard, which is the most common form. In the following suggestions we will try and deal with the standard of students and pre-University education, based on certain data taken out of national exams for the obligatory Elementary School System, and High School Education. It is this data collected between 2006-2011, but also long years of experience in teaching that enables me to raise the hypothesis that there has been a comedown of our language especially of the written one. Many students reach their A Levels and leave school on a non-satisfactory standard, sometimes without even a basic level of language use. If we are to stress the great importance of students learning to write, speak, read and understand Standard Albanian, if we believe it is a duty and responsibility of schools, platform and curriculum

compilers which enable them to be provided with the basics for further success in their lives, then we need to change the way the Albanian Language is taught in schools.

The traditional curriculum starting from class 1-9 teaches and gives emphasis to reading, writing, speaking, listening and observing; considered as the top five proficiencies or the group of rules. It comes as no surprise to many teachers that this teaching method has not brought about the required progress a student needs. If we are to refer to grammar methodology; research has shown language teaching in an abstract way, disconnected from the real substance and current use, and does not improve students' linguistic skills. Knowledge of formal grammatical rules is not related with the ability to make a grammatically correct essay. A student, who has a class on punctuation marks, is less likely to remember that knowledge on the next one, where they are taught about writing. One of the reasons why students fail to convey grammatical rules in other linguistic activities is that teachers don't teach it to them effectively. This is partly due to the layout of the textbooks (based on very confusing programs), but also their skills as lecturers. One could argue that teachers who are very fond of teaching would tend to motivate students even more into learning. Unfortunately, a more enthusiastic approach to teaching could hardly improve students' abilities in learning Standard Albanian. If in every class a new set of rules is introduced, students feel more and more isolated towards one-another, as long as some of them hardly master the basics of it, while others have progressed with every passing lesson. This isolation reduces the time that could be dedicated to reading, writing and conversation in class:

Grammar currently taught in school has three main shortcomings:

- It is not taught in a motivational way (emotionally);
- Instructions, information given as rules-and-arrangement-like forms do not help students mastering greater linguistic skills;
- This type of teaching does not address failures that students encountered while trying to master standard Albanian.

As a result we are faced year on year with a fall in national exams' standards.

Let us refer to A level results for the academic year 2009-2010, for the section *let's write*.

Four main criteria have been regarded on its evaluation:

- | | |
|--|---------|
| a) An idea's explication | 2 point |
| b) Structure / setting up | 1 point |
| c) Style and originality | 1 point |
| d) Linguistic accuracy (syntax and spelling) | 2 point |

Having analyzed the results of each criteria for this question, we find:

i) An idea's explication

Only 20% of the students have managed to get top scores of two points, therefore succeeding in answering correctly, whilst 44% have scored zero points. I believe the reasons might be:

- a) Not being concentrated on only one particular idea,

- vagueness on what is being required;
- b) Unable to concentrate on the submitted requirement within the question asked;
- c) Unable to compose a letter and explain the reasons why this particular character is chosen, what makes him or her so special.

ii) Structure / setting up

Only 39% of the students have managed to get top scores of one point and 60.60% have scored zero points. There appears to be a serious gap and I presume some of the reasons behind this inability in setting up and structuring the answer could be:

- a) Vagueness of what it means to set up a letter;
- b) Setting out a letter's content, paragraphs and their unification.
- c) Students' lack of practice on this type of question during the school years.

iii) Style and originality

Again, there appears to be low scores. Therefore, only 40% of the students have managed to get top scores of one point and 60% have scored zero points.

From analyzing the results there appears to be a tendency on leaning towards affirmation and repetition. There is a lack of vocabulary and originality. This could be related to:

- a) Not enough work on specific tasks (analyses, comparisons, descriptions, arguments), which step by step lead to a personal way of expression and rich vocabulary.

Anyway, these remain disputable reasons that need to be examined extremely carefully by tests' compilers.

iv) Linguistic accuracy

We notice that 15% have managed to get top scores of two points, whilst 36% have scored one point and 49% zero points.

The proportion of students scoring zero points is way too high. That means, these students appear to make many spelling and punctuation mistakes while trying to articulate the answer, as well as finding it hard to form sentences, with their complexity and variety. Once more, we think that the reasons behind it all are related to the inadequate work that is carried out on writing classes.

A levels

Having analyzed the results of each evaluation criteria for the essay question, we find that:

- For the *idea's explication* (criteria 1) only 11 % of the students have managed to get top scores of two points, whilst 44% have scored zero points. I believe the reasons behind it might be:
- For *structure and setting up* only 5.6% of the students have managed to get top scores of two points and 62.9% have scored zero points. Again, there appears to be a serious gap and I think some of the reasons for this inability in structuring and setting up an answer could be:
 - a) Vagueness of what it means to set out a piece of writing into paragraphs and their unification;

- b) Students' lack of practice on this type of question during the school years.

- On *style and originality*, there appears to be again very low scores. Therefore, only 2.5% of the population has managed to get top scores of two points and 70.1% scored zero points. From analyzing the results there appears to be a tendency on leaning towards affirmation and repetition. There is lack of vocabulary and originality. This could be related to:
 - a) Reading few literary and non-literary works.
 - b) Not enough work on specific tasks (analyses, comparisons, descriptions, arguments), which step by step lead to a personal way of expression and rich vocabulary.
- On *syntactic and orthographic accuracy* we notice that 10.6% of the students have scored two points and 44.5% scored zero points.

Some of the gravest mistakes noticed are about

- Use of –ë (when in the middle or the end of the word)
- Use of –ç instead of –q and vice-versa.
- Short forms
- Paradigm of inflection and conjugation
- Verb tenses
- Sentence structure (incomplete sentences, without a clear word order)
- Punctuation marks
- Insufficient use of synonyms
- Adopting a lot of foreign words and slang

Students, but all of us as well are now in great need of a new language curriculum, which would help them enormously in achieving success in the classroom and beyond. The current language they are taught in school, has failed to provide them with the necessary skills badly needed for standard Albanian. Disconnected lessons fail to relate to their skills and therefore fall short of making improvements.

Conclusion

Despite of all the flaws that Albanian language teaching presents these days in schools, it must continue to be taught. However, we should not follow in the footsteps taken so far. Teaching standard language needs improving. If students are constantly exposed to standard language facts and almost never to those of dialects, this, in my opinion, constitutes a problem. As professionals, we should demand that no language teacher can be such, if they do not master the basics of dialects. A teacher of that caliber would know how to deal with various forms of language, patterns of style within dialects, depending on typical situations. They would try and give a rational explanation of the facts and only then students would realize the true function and value of having to master and put to good use standard language in society.

This is what schools need to aim at nowadays, carrying on with their mission in teaching students to read and write standard language, as the language of educated speakers everywhere in society.

Reference

1. Esky, David E. The case for the standard language

2. Labov, William: A study of Non-Standard English, Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington. D.C. Eric Clearinghouse for Linguistics. Jan.69
3. Education curriculum: year 8, 9, 10, 11, 12.
4. National A levels, Public Report, year 9 and 12, academic year 2009-2010.