The Role of Language Education in Peacebuilding: The Case of Cyprus

Maya Hunter
Eastern Illinois University

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“The Role of Language Education in Peacebuilding: the Case of Cyprus”

[Abstract]

In the context of post-conflict, linguistically divided societies, the promotion of a third language in national educational policy can be a catalyst for the creation of a syncretic national identity and an invaluable cornerstone of peacebuilding education. The promotion of humanistic values through foreign language instruction can provide younger generations in divided societies the social and practical education necessary to establish and maintain positive intercommunal dialogues. Such multipurpose lessons have been used to facilitate peacebuilding in cases ranging from Rwanda to the Balkans, but could they work in Cyprus? And if so, how? This research aims to answer that question through an ethnographic study of high school English instructors in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Although the standardized national curriculum does not explicitly promote peacebuilding, foreign language lessons may nonetheless. This research is based on the hypothesis that the inclusion of English-language media in lessons promotes peacebuilding through the conveyance of humanistic values, and that the internalization of these values affects students’ development of national identity and perspectives on the potential resolution of the Cyprus Conflict. Data for this research was gathered through twelve semi-
structured qualitative interviews with English-language instructors and first-hand observation of their classrooms in Turkish-language high schools in Northern Cyprus between September 2019 and January 2020. Additional evidence includes information and perspectives gained through the researcher’s contact with members of various academic and civic organizations active in the peacebuilding process. The findings of this project offer valuable insights into the role of third-language education in the peacebuilding process of linguistically divided, post-conflict societies.

[Introduction]

It is by no means the norm for national educational policy to explicitly include peace education values in any form of standardized curricula, let alone in foreign language education. It was a welcome surprise, then, when a subject of this research, an English literature teacher in a public high school in Cyprus’s capital city of Nicosia, enthusiastically described her lessons’ observable effects on the civic, social, and moral education of her students. In her testimony, the humanistic values promoted through media-based lessons profoundly influence students’ development of empathy, respect for other cultures, connection to non-ethnically based identities, and other peace education concepts. The certainty with which she made this claim was unique, but its message was not. In interviews with nearly a dozen other English language instructors, a consensus was formed on both the presence of peace education values in media-based curricula and their roles in the development of students’ cognitive and social skills in diverse areas. Subjects’ responses to this effect support the central hypothesis of this research; that the inclusion of media-based lessons in foreign language education, through the implicit or explicit conference of humanistic and peace education values and practical language skills,
supports the development of intercommunal dialogue between new generations of students and thus affects the potential resolution of the ongoing Cyprus Conflict.

Evidence from cases across the world show that education, specifically in topics within the social sciences, can play a significant role in peacebuilding in post-conflict societies (Bush 2000; Williams 2004). In societies where social divisions are demarcated by both ethnicity and language, an emphasis on foreign language education in national curricula can facilitate intercommunal dialogue, connection to a syncretic national identity, and can promote values necessary for establishing and maintaining positive peace (Marques et al 2003, Barakat et al 2013, Manojlovic 2017, Obura 2018). Many of these cases, however, are places where the education systems have undergone radical transformation following social conflict, and whose curricula have been deliberately reconstructed to promote peace values. This research examines foreign language education in the context of Cyprus, in which the educational policies of each community have not undergone such reconstruction. The goal of this research is to show how the pedagogy of foreign language education (specifically the inclusion of media in lessons) in Cyprus can promote peace values nonetheless.

[Literature Review]

The ideals of liberal democracy, argued to be applicable worldwide following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, have been challenged by the emergence of new types of interstate warfare and civil conflict. The international peacekeeping community has been successful in stemming violence and facilitating the return of stability in
may situations, but is often unable to construct the type of dynamic, positive peace necessary to maintain that stability after the departure of peacekeepers. Such shortcomings (of which Cyprus is included), have tested the faith of the international community in a liberal world order and its formulaic conception of peace (Robert 1994, Bratt 1996). This crisis of legitimacy has presented an opportunity for traditional methods of peacekeeping to be criticized and new theories and value systems to enter into the debate (Pugh 2011). One particular argument serves as the theoretical foundation and justification of this research, localization. In this context, localization describes the prioritization of local expertise, inclusion of communal input, and sensitivity to cultural context in peacebuilding operations, with which they are regularly proven to be more immediately effective and stable even after the departure of international intervention forces (Leondardsson 2015, Autesserre 2018).

Emphasis on local participation, despite the appearance of obvious necessity, is a somewhat new idea; traditional international intervention in conflict areas has frequently proven to be overly centralized, heavily theoretical, and comprised of staff with little to no local expertise. Critics of this culture of international intervention denounce its detachment from the everyday realities of societies in conflict. Too often, the peacekeeping community misplaces emphasis on theoretical knowledge and technical experience over locational specialization and intimate familiarity with the conflict in context. The result of this value system is the ineffectiveness or outright failure of peacekeeping operations, as caused by unnecessary wastage of the mission’s resources (material, financial, and human), the disenfranchisement of local populations with the interveners’ mission (lack of community support), and the inherent instability of any peace built (as its dependence on the presences of the peacekeepers suggests) (Autesserre 2018).
Local participation in peacebuilding activities is necessarily dependent on a well-informed and cooperative population; the importance of education in post-conflict societies is impossible to understate. In order to effectively promote peace through educational policy, it is necessary to re-conceptualize curricula as holistic, and to emphasize the development of students’ civic and humanitarian characters. The effect of such an approach to education is the transformation of national society into a dynamic, collaborative community, one able to effectively respond and adapt to drastic social change following a civil conflict (Manojlovic 2008). Changes to curricula construction can take effect in all areas, but most important to the civic development of students are courses in the areas of social science and humanities. History education especially influences students’ national identities and their potential for participation in post-conflict reconstruction activities, but the pedagogy of instructors can inadvertently teach students to divide the population between the victims and perpetuators of violence. Such lessons naturally affect the politicization of national memory and can invite the reemergence of conflict in the future and impede efforts to unify opposing factions of a national community (Manojlovic 2008). The interplay of history education and students’ development of national identities has been thoroughly analyzed by experts in the social sciences for decades. As contemporary theories of nationalism argue, the socialization of children solidifies concepts of national identity through the subjective presentation of historical narratives and perpetuation of national memory (Bush 2000, Williams 2004). This type of collective memory, as a “living imagination”, is continually shaped by both the social contexts in which it is presented and by the figures of public authority who may wield its emotional weight for political gain (Hutton 2000).

The imperative of reshaping national educational policy in post-conflict societies is clear; in order to avoid the intentional or accidental reemergence of the social circumstances in which
conflict arose, history and civic education must be revised through careful analysis of the explicit and implicit lessons it may confer unto students. Noting the fundamental, reciprocal relationship between social education and social violence, it is not unreasonable to argue that the classroom is the most effective stage for successful conflict resolution and the promotion of peace. Pedagogy is as important as specific lesson content in the transmission of national history, identity, and ideals; educators also influence their students’ conceptions of conflict and peace through their presentations of knowledge, as fixed or interpretable, and their tolerance of opposing viewpoints in constructive discussion (Williams 2004).

Restructuring educational policy on the basis of these theories is an imperative for local and national authorities in post-conflict societies and are clearly exampled by the policy changes implemented by the Rwandan Ministry of Education after the 1994 genocide. The Ministry’s steps toward such a restructuring included hosting a national conference of educators, facilitating the development of a consensus on new educational missions, and finally redesigning the national curricula to reflect these goals. The missions of the reformed education system in Rwanda post-1994 were clearly enumerated, and included commitments to developing students free from the traditional structures of discrimination, fostering an awareness of human rights and the social responsibility of citizens in the national and international community, and the creation of a society based on the ideals of justice, tolerance, democracy, and national solidarity. Among the targeted outcomes of the reformed system, emphasis was placed on proficiency in the “unifying” national languages of French and English. Promotion of “common” languages sought to facilitate dialogue between members of the national community despite their differing ethnic languages, and so lay the fundamental basis for peace (Obura 2004).
Foreign language education in post-conflict contexts, particularly when members of opposing communities do not share a language, has the potential for profound effects on the peacebuilding efforts of the society in question. When instructors include foreign literature and other types of media in lessons, they effectively convey humanistic values (i.e., critical source and content analysis) and peace education values (empathy, tolerance, etc.) to students, either explicitly or implicitly. The central argument of this research rests on this theoretical framework: through the inclusion of media-based lessons, foreign language education in linguistically-divided, post-conflict societies offers students both the practical and cognitive skills necessary to engage in meaningful dialogue with their conational peers and so promote the establishment and maintenance of a positive and sustainable peace.

This research focuses on the context of English language education in Cyprus, and its possible effects on the future of the peacebuilding process on the island. The Cyprus Conflict is a complex one, so to better understand the current situation and possible directions of development, a brief review of its history is needed.

[Historical Background]

Reunification negotiations between the two Cypriot governments, often including representatives from the guarantor powers and the United Nations, have been frequent in the years since the initial division of the island; countless summits facilitated by the United Nations and supported by interested world powers have been only moderately successful in producing a limited scope of agreements between each community’s leaders. The closest the two ever came
to reunification was in 2004, on the basis of a comprehensive plan for establishment a bi-zonal, bi-communal federated United Republic of Cyprus. Known as the Annan Plan, the settlement was put to separate simultaneous referenda on April 24, 2004. Turkish Cypriot voters approved the plan by 65%, but 76% of Greek Cypriot voters rejected it, citing concerns of the economic hardship of conjoining the island’s two economies, the threat of “de-Hellenization” of Greek Cypriot society, and the influence of mainland Turkey in the island’s affairs thereafter (Sözen 2007). As voters clearly expressed, the top-down, elite-devised diplomatic settlement did not adequately address their fears, and tangible the possibility of reunification was lost.

Following the Annan Plan referenda, the sympathies of the international community were swayed in favor of the Turkish Cypriots; acknowledging the genuine effort and goodwill of their leadership and public in reunification negotiations, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan stated in his 2004 report to the Security Council that their vote had “undone any rationale” for their continued isolation from international society (UNFICYP, Sözen 2004). Efforts to find a new solution, or to better prepare the Cypriot communities for reception of a solution, have so far been inconclusive. The most recent round of negotiations, a 9-day conference of “five-plus-UN” representatives in Crans-Montana in 2017, ended in bitter disappointment; though described as the best chance for settling the Cyprus Conflict once and for all, the leaders still could not agree on its terms (Andreou 2017). It wasn’t until 2019 that the two Cypriot leaders met again, merely to arrange a future “five-plus-UN” conference on the tentative resumption of discussion (UNFICYP). Public sentiment towards the peace process after such disappointments has turned markedly pessimistic; according to opinion polls conducted in both communities, Cypriots are doubtful that the current negotiations will yield any significant progress, and some even hope
that they don’t. The Conflict has become comfortable, and many on the island would prefer to maintain the status quo than to face the new challenges of reunification (Sözen et al 2009).

Continuation of the conflict has profound effects on the lives of local citizens, regional affairs, and global international relations. The daily lives of Cypriot citizens are affected by the physical division of the island; familial and communal ties were broken, and rightful property lost, as a result of the official exchange of citizens over the Green Line and into their respective ethnic communities; Turkish Cypriots continue to suffer the effects of the global economic sanction of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and are denied the rights of access to the European Union given to their Greek Cypriot neighbors; both communities have been forced into dependence on their ethnic “mother” countries and struggle to retain autonomy in the context of regional geopolitical relations. The Conflict remains a point of hostility between the mainland Greek and Turkish governments and has severely impeded Turkey’s efforts to join the European Union (Athanasopulos 2001; Sözen 2004). In light of the discovery of significant natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean seabed, the continuation or the settlement of the situation stands to impact the future of regional energy trade and the economic and political relations of regional actors. The United Nations, the European Union, and many other international organizations and interested powers seek to influence the development of the Conflict, further complicating it and pushing the possibility of settlement further away (Özgür 2017).

[Transition to Theory]

This situation invites a context-specific application of the theoretical framework of peacebuilding localization, in which average citizens are included in each step of the negotiation
and implementation processes of resolution in order to ensure their full support of the resulting agreement. In order to effectively promote community involvement in reconciliation efforts, members of post-conflict societies must be given both the practical skills and social values necessary to engage in positive dialogue with each other. In addition to equipping students with the actual language with which to do so, peacebuilding educations seeks to assuage fears of the “other”, foster empathy and tolerance, and develop cooperative perspectives on intercommunal relations. Even without the explicit directive of national education ministries, such peace education values may still be conveyed through indirect channels, particularly through subjects in the social science and humanities disciplines. As suggested by the literature on which this research is founded, the pedagogy of lessons is as important as material in the conveyance of these values; this research examines the relationship between media-based foreign language lessons and students’ development of peace education values. Generalizations about the possible role of language education in post-ethnic conflict peacebuilding efforts are also drawn from the conclusions of this project.

[Methodology]

This research, conducted through an ethnographic study of English language education in Northern Cypriot high schools, utilizes a combination of data collected through semi-structured interviews with instructors and non-participant observation in classrooms. Due to the legal and diplomatic challenges of conducting this study in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, authorization to conduct research in the (southern) Republic of Cyprus was not attainable. Any references to the characteristics of the Greek Cypriot educational system are based on observations provided by subjects, Turkish Cypriot or of other nationalities, who have had
professional experience with both systems of education, and are supported by published academic literature. All efforts were made to locate unbiased sources.

Contact with instructors and school administrators was established through two main forms of outreach. Efforts to contact subjects were initially aided by the Faculty of Foreign Language Education at Eastern Mediterranean University. The department’s English-language education students are required to complete a practicum of both classroom observation and practice teaching under the direction of English instructors in local schools, and thus the Faculty maintains a close relationship with local school administrators. Through this preexisting network, contact with English instructors in both middle and high schools in the Famagusta area was established with little difficulty. In addition, the Alumni Relations Office offered valuable assistance in identifying and contacting many Eastern Mediterranean alumni now working in schools in surrounding areas. The director of the Office was particularly instrumental in establishing contact with relevant school administrators, and used both professional and personal connections to facilitate both the arrangement of classroom observations and interviews with instructors.

Subjects were also found through the researcher’s participation in activities off-campus, primarily held in Nicosia/Lefkoşa area of the United Nations-administered Buffer Zone. Activities of this type, including bi-communal cultural festivals and NGO networking events, brought together participants from many different demographics; the acquaintance of several English-language instructors was made through the initiation of casual conversation with organizers and attendees. Subjects recruited through both methods were then asked to refer colleagues, and in this way the subject pool was gradually expanded.
Interviews were held in instructors’ schools, at a time of their choosing, as to be as minimally disruptive as possible. Arrangements were made through whatever method of contact provided by the Faculty of Foreign Language Education, Alumni Relations Office, or other subjects, and was frequently facilitated by Turkish-speaking staff members. In advance of each interview and classroom observation, letters were sent to each school formally inviting instructors to participate in the research, requesting permission from school administrators to observe lessons, and notifying the parents of students of the research taking place. These letters were approved by the Eastern Illinois University Internal Review Board, and were provided in both English and professionally-translated Turkish formats.

Upon arrival at each location, introductions were first made to school principals and department chairs, in order to both observe the local customs of hospitality and ensure that instructors’ participation in the research was fully supported by all members of the administration. School principals were asked to sign the letter officially requesting permission to observe lessons, for the sake of documenting their consent.

Data was gathered from three Turkish Cypriot schools and one bi-communal school in the Greek Cypriot-administered area of Nicosia. Three lessons were formally observed: one ‘standard’ English lesson and two English literature lessons. In total, twelve instructors were interviewed: eleven Turkish Cypriot and one Greek Cypriot.

The duration of each interview depended primarily on the flexibility of instructors’ schedules and their personal responsiveness to questions, but lasted on average between 20 and 30 minutes. The interview protocol consisted of ten general question themes, allowing room for adjustment of the details of questions based on the interview’s particular circumstance. Themes explored instructors’ backgrounds, professional development and career experiences, typical
classroom activities, and the usage of English-language media in lessons. If reported present, the subject was asked to elaborate on their selection criteria for the material, the frequency of its usage, its role in lessons, and its content. Instructors were also asked for their observations of students’ independent consumption of English-language media, and for perceived signs of correlation between media consumption and students’ English proficiency, engagement in English-led discussions, and attitude towards material of any type from other cultures and perspectives.

Following these themes, instructors were questioned on the presence of any type of discussion on political affairs or international news within the frames of their lessons, and for their observations on students’ engagement with such discussions. To better understand the mentality from which instructors teach their lessons, the last question theme of the protocol included an exploration of subjects’ views on the ongoing negotiations of the Cyprus Conflict, its overall effects on their daily lives, and their perceptions of new generations’ roles in the development of a resolution in the future.

[Analysis]

The data gathered for this project expresses strong evidence of a positive correlation between media-based language lessons and the promotion of both the practical skills and social values necessary for the island’s ongoing reconciliation efforts. Dialogue between the Greek- and Turkish Cypriot communities, from grassroots social clubs to high-level diplomatic negotiations, is conducted in English. Proficiency is an obvious prerequisite for participation in such activities, but it is not the only component of positive bi-communal interaction.
Only proficiency is consciously promoted by the standardized national curriculum of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, includes both ‘standard’ English courses and English literature courses. The standard courses focus primarily on grammar and vocabulary, while literature courses are based on the critical analysis of diverse examples of English-language media. Each instructor interviewed agreed on the importance of English language education to continued bi-communal negotiations, but standard-course instructors often focused such viewpoints on practical communication skills alone, while the instructors of literature courses focused on the facilitative role of cognitive abilities and moral ideals conveyed through their lessons.

Every standard-course instructor reported having an obligation to follow a strict lesson schedule prescribed by the national curriculum, allowing them little freedom to include materials not provided by the official course book. Students in such lessons practiced language skills alone, and lessons rarely included topics of any political relevance (such as history, national or international news, etc.). Instructors denied the presence of any overtly political lesson in their classrooms, often repeating a similar sentiment: politics are not their subject, and for the sake of maintaining classroom order and adherence to the course schedule, discussions of a political nature or particularly sensitive topic were generally dissuaded. Multiple sources referred to the usage of English in diplomatic spheres and bi-communal negotiations and described the importance of proficiency in a politician’s ability to debate, persuade, and affect meaningful policy change, yet upheld that they avoid political discussions in their classroom. Many also mentioned having made pointed efforts to include current events topics in their lessons, for the explicit sake of expanding their students’ knowledge of the world and awareness of international affairs, but again restated their lack of time and flexibility in the classroom. Clearly, among
standard-course instructors, there lay a disconnect between acknowledging English proficiency as a tool of great political utility and actively promoting this conception to students.

Among English literature instructors, however, many recognize the inherent political and social implications of educating young adults in humanities subjects. Instructors offered many different examples of the ways in which their lessons produce observable effects on students’ political ideologies, but as a whole these perspectives can be grouped into two main processes. First, the cognitive skills gained through literature analysis exercises allow students to critically examine the highly-politicized versions of events, both historical and current, distributed by state news agencies and civics lessons. As was reported by a professor of journalism in an interview outside the scope of this study, the local Turkish Cypriot newspapers and broadcast programs receive what were described as “ready-made” stories from the mainland Turkish state news agency, directly importing Ankara- and Istanbul-centric narratives. This, in the opinion of this subject and several others, is problematic due to Turkish Cypriots’ unique conception of national identity; many on the island feel that the Cypriot component of their nationality outweighs the Turkish, and argue that the views “spoon-fed” to the Cypriot community by the Turkish state media do not accurately reflect their perception of events (CITE?).

It is for this reason that the critical thinking skills promoted by literature-based English lessons have the potential for impact beyond the classroom; students trained in source and content analysis, with the skills necessary to question the goals (find synonym) of state-sponsored Turkish media outlets, are capable of judging the relative objectivity of its content and developing their own ideas. While these ideas may not be entirely free from bias in and of themselves, students of English literature are far better equipped to process, interpret, and evaluate the national narratives offered to them by political elites through the media.
The second process by which literature-based lessons influence students’ developing perspectives on the Conflict has more to do with humanist ideology, components here referred to as ‘peace values’. These include tolerance, empathy, and respect of others’ perspectives, and are promoted by the exploration of diverse pieces of internationally-sourced media. Lessons based upon this framework teach students to consider multiple viewpoints as valid, to avoid extreme or alienating opinions, and to develop a more nuanced conception of truth and justice that applies to every facet of their social education. Students are also encouraged to empathize with the piece’s author or protagonist, who may be from another class, culture, or religion, and thus to recognize the inherent value of human experience. As one subject described, her lessons are “proactive” in bringing about change and teaching students to “see the other”;

“I think that literature is a prime subject to instill a vision, ideas, to question, to develop empathy, and all the ‘goodie’ words… I see it as a wonderful opportunity to promote [peace], and I’m very happy to have this, to be in this profession, with the subject that I’m teaching.”

Another described the unexpected reaction of a student to a piece of wartime journalism, related to a lesson on analyzing the effects of social background and psychology on the presentation of disturbing topics in the publication:

“In a passage about Somalia, written by a famous BBC reporter, [the reporter] said that ‘We went there to get a prize, a Noble prize, for the photographs that we take, or for the news stories we would be presenting.’ And he did actually get the prize, the award, but the things that he had written about the plight of the people in Somalia, about the civil war there, I could see some of the kids welling up, and they, they started crying because of the way the people were left behind by their families. […] When they read [about] the plight of the people, they were quite upset, so I turned around and I asked them, ‘Do you see how lucky you are? To live in such a peaceful place?’ and tried to tell them, you know, empathize with your fellow man, feel [his] pain…”
Suffice to say that these moral lessons are not only constructive, but deconstructive as well; with these skills and values, students begin to break down the antagonistic nationalism and mistrust of the other that is so pervasive in both Cypriot communities. The general sentiment of interviewees and other contacts in Northern Cyprus is one of disappointment and mistrust; following the disastrous results of the 2004 Annan Plan referenda, Turkish Cypriots are skeptical of the intentions of the political elite involved in the negotiation process, and of Greek Cypriot’s commitment to any type of reunification. While a valuable tool in bi-communal dialogue and high-level diplomatic negotiations, English proficiency alone does nothing to address these sentiments; only through the peace values conveyed through literature-based lessons can students begin to dismantle the mental and emotional roadblocks standing in the way of reconciliation.

[Conclusions]

By these means, English literature education fosters the development of skills character traits necessary for the continuation of bi-communal reconciliation activities. Acknowledging the importance of practical language skills, evidence presented in this research suggests that media-based lessons have a complementary effect on standard English lessons for the facilitation of Cyprus’s ongoing reunification efforts.


