

## Critics' Forum

### Literature

#### **Why Teach Our Kids Armenian?**

By Myrna Douzjian

As a proud graduate of Alex Pilibos, I often like to reflect on the fruits that local Armenian schools have borne over the last forty years. There's no shortage of teachers, administrators, artists, musicians, writers, editors, journalists, filmmakers, political activists, doctors, lawyers, pharmacists, scientists, mathematicians, architects, business owners and professionals. Some have even made big names for themselves. Every year we read about the impressive acceptance rates of Armenian school graduates into some of the country's most prestigious universities. There's no doubt, Armenian schools, students, and parents are doing many things right in the field of education.

Yet there remains a gaping hole in the demographics of the citizens that our schools have produced. None of our community's Armenian language arts instructors, Armenian-language writers, journalists, or editors is a graduate of one of our local schools. This fact is highly disturbing. Are we really incapable of producing a single, homegrown Armenian language and literature teacher? Our community and our academic institutions have failed miserably in this regard.

Two weeks ago I attended a small conference addressing the issue of Armenian language instruction at Vahan and Anoush Chamlian Armenian School, in the Los Angeles suburb of La Crescenta. Conference attendees and participants included Armenian school alumni, parents of students currently at Chamlian, a few of the school's Armenian instructors and administrators, university-level Armenian language instructors and literature and composition instructors. As expected, the initial conversation raised more questions than it answered: Why can't graduates, after attending Armenian school for at least a decade, compose a single grammatical paragraph in Armenian? What are the goals of Armenian language instruction in our schools? Is it enough for students to graduate with intermediate oral proficiency and elementary reading and writing proficiency in Armenian?

With regard to the question of goals, Professor Hagop Gulludjian, who teaches Western Armenian at UCLA, introduced the concept of a critical mass – a small minority of the speakers of a given language who are engaged in intellectual activity, creative and journalistic writing. According to his argument, in order for Armenian to continue to be a living language in our community, our schools need to work toward creating such a critical mass. In a follow-up conversation with him, he stressed that we're talking very small numbers here – two to three hundred adult readers, a handful of writers and thinkers, and a couple of teachers per generation are enough to keep the language alive and evolving and to carry it over to the next generation. Gulludjian's presentation explicitly highlighted the absence of an Armenian-language intellectual elite educated in our schools – the teachers, linguists, writers, journalists, translators, and editors that every culture with a literary capital must have in order to subsist.

Although seemingly a very feasible goal, we're quite a ways away from the production of a critical mass, at least from my perspective. Here, I must digress for a moment in order to place this problem in a larger context. The decline in language literacy is an all too familiar symptom plaguing the entire American nation. Year after year, I've witnessed this phenomenon in my literature and composition courses at UCLA, where students write papers that consist of incomprehensible sentences, like this one: "Lives are situated with specialized obligations and uniform day-by-day procedures." Unfortunately, this example represents the rule, not the exception. So it's no exaggeration that "finding effective ways to teach today's student population is perhaps the greatest challenge facing literacy educators in the United States" (Ernest Morrell "Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Popular Culture: Literacy Development Among Urban Youth" *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*. Sept. 2002.)

And, of course, we're all quite familiar with the humanities' struggle to prove its relevance, because, unfortunately, "education in America today is almost exclusively about the GDP" and "the only subject under discussion, the only real criterion for investment—in short, the alpha and omega of educational policy—is jobs" (Mark Slouka, "Dehumanized: When Math and Science Rule the School." *Harper's Magazine*. Sept. 2009.) Because utilitarian approaches to education are the norm, educators in the humanities find themselves having to frame the importance of what they do in terms of economic benefit. The often-unquantifiable benefits of humanities curricula – developing critical thinking and analytical skills, generating innovative ideas, challenging the status quo, and fostering creativity – are translated into the language of cost-benefit analysis. As a result, the humanities are almost constantly devalued and under the threat of attack.

The ways in which most people read and write have also changed dramatically. The increased digitization of literature and news media and the closure of bookstores (even our local Barnes & Noble in Encino closed down!) are all indications that the nature of reading is shifting toward the intangible – the electronic journal, the blog post, the e-reader. For the most part, except for the "critical mass" Professor Gulludjian identified, we don't read, we skim. In fact, the process of being online can be considered a type of skimming. We surf from one webpage to the next, picking up "snidbits" of information from here and there.

Where does this leave the correlation between old-school reading and language literacy? It may very well be that our institutions struggle with language arts instruction because of this very shift that includes both a general decline in reading and a specific change in the ways in which we read. The "accelerated history" that Talar Chahinian mentioned in her *Critics' Forum* article last month first and foremost implies the acceleration of language and communication. Consequently, my colleagues report that when they incorporate blogs and discussion boards online (both forms of what we might call accelerated, e-communication) into their curricula, their students respond immensely better than they do in the standard five-page writing assignments. I've also found it easier to teach critical analysis and writing through the incorporation of media available on YouTube, film, and visual materials. The challenge remains striking a balance between quick and culturally familiar material and difficult, sometimes abstract curricula.

So, it comes as no surprise that Armenian schools face a doubly steep up-hill battle in this hyper-utilitarian, e-centered, high-speed society of ours – that is, if one of their missions continues to be effective Armenian language arts instruction. They do, however, have many resources they can look to for support. Armenian is one of the language options on Facebook. Professor Gulludjian first brought to my attention that this feature could be appropriated in the form of interesting writing assignments for students at no cost to schools. Several resources online offer interesting research-based ideas about the incorporation of film, television and media in the language arts. The aforementioned article by Ernest Morrell is a good place to start. Most importantly, there are young college- and university-level Armenian language instructors, trained in the most up-to-date pedagogical methods, who should be employed by our schools as advisors to the programs in Armenian language arts.

In that regard, Shushan Karapetyan, a PhD student in the Near Eastern Languages and Cultures Department at UCLA, also presented the findings of her research at the conference at Chamlian. Among other things, she pointed out that, according to studies conducted by linguists in various foreign languages, heritage language learners have the ability to achieve near native fluency in a language four times faster than those studying a language from an entirely blank slate. (Heritage language learners are those who, with varying degrees of proficiency, have learned a language that is not the dominant one spoken in their larger social environment, because they spoke it at home.) To all of us listening, that minor statistic highlighted the importance of speaking Armenian at home. Karapetyan, who designed the curriculum for heritage Armenian for high school students at UCLA, has amassed a wealth of information about active learning strategies in the language arts. Her presentation was especially impressive because it situated Armenian-language instruction within pedagogical trends and statistical findings across several other foreign languages.

Our community hasn't produced a critical mass of Armenian readers and writers because we have financially and ideologically devalued the roles that such a group of intellectuals would play. If we want to develop a new direction for our American-born generations, we need to create high-paying positions and worthwhile endowments in the *Armenian* language arts. And the thinkers and innovators will follow. But perhaps it's too late. Perhaps we've already given up on the survival of the Armenian language in the Diaspora. Perhaps it's a language that's too irrelevant (and, in the case of Western Armenian, on the path toward extinction). If not, then we need to put our money where our mouth is. No serious educational effort succeeds without major financial and moral investment. We don't need more churches or community centers. We need the critical mass that our Armenian schools have the potential to produce, and we need to stop relying on waves of immigration to keep the Armenian language alive in the US. It seems Chamlian plans to take further steps in this regard with efforts at modernizing its pedagogical approach to Armenian language arts instruction. I hope that the local educational boards of our schools will follow Chamlian's footsteps in addressing this issue by taking serious and immediate practical measures. And I hope that the community

will provide fervent support for such a movement. Otherwise, the answer to the question posed by the title of this article will continue to remain ambiguous.

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