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Language Diversity in the Greek Educational System: Promoting Multilingual Classroom Policies

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LANGUAGE DIVERSITY IN THE GREEK EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: PROMOTING MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOM POLICIES

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Abstract

This study focuses on the position of mother languages in Greek education at the level of educational policy, demonstrating the necessity of their further emergence based on modern scientific findings on the benefits of bilingualism. Through an effort to record a set of obstacles that make it difficult for them to join the curriculum, a framework is proposed to be used for the language repertoire of all pupils, so that their rights are respected in practice and their linguistic richness serves as a source of enrichment for the whole population. The implementation of practices that could enhance the free and equal expression of members of a multilingual and multicultural classroom can thus be supported, initially, by the institutionalization of the function of classes, where the different languages of immigrants and refugees living in Greece will be taught. At the same time, the promotion of teaching strategies focusing on the use of all spoken languages and dialects, even in conventional classes, can contribute to the strengthening of intercultural communication and the most essential development of linguistic skills of all pupils, through the process of critically negotiating a variety of cultural products.

Introduction

The use of the language repertoire of all members of the classroom assists in the learning of the target language as well, since a multitude of meta-cognitive skills is used in both languages and refer to the same information processing system. Although the scientific findings from the field of Linguistics and Pedagogy have contributed to the revision of many established concepts of second language learning, the position of first languages in modern educational systems is still under negotiation. In the case of Greece, significant efforts have been made in recent years to redefine the objectives of language teaching in the direction of understanding the different linguistic and social characteristics of pupils, by adopting the principles of *critical literacy* (Luke, 2012) in the institutionalized curricula (L1 Curriculum, 2011). However, the spoken languages are not taught or used to a satisfactory degree in school classes, even in those of educational structures that have a relevant target. As a result of these conditions, practical methods are often applied in monolingual terms. In this paper, an attempt will be made to identify the causes of neglecting pupils' first languages and propose a more effective framework for including different languages into formal education.

Theoretical Framework

A more meaningful understanding of the phenomenon of bilingualism and its effects on the individual is crucial, as it can be the basis for adjusting applied educational policies and practices. It is now confirmed that the first (L1) and the second language (L2) to learn do not compete with one another. On the contrary, they are in a relationship of interdependence. Therefore, the term “mother tongue”, commonly used in most countries, has been replaced in recent years by the term “first language”, which focuses mostly on the time of comprehension. The first language is the one that a person learns first in the course of his/her development (Triarchi-Herrmann, 2000). The model of Separate Underlying Language Proficiency has been abolished, giving its place in the concept of "communicating vessels", the Common Underlying Proficiency, according to which there are linguistic, cognitive and meta-language / communicative skills that are common in both languages and can be transferred from one to the other (Figure 1). Although the two languages seem distinct at a superficial level, there is, however, a common underlying capability that links the cognitive and linguistic capacities common to both languages (Cummins, 2005, p. 5; 1981).



Figure 1: Model of Bilingual Proficiency (Cummins, 2005, p. 4)

Therefore, based on the Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis, which suggests that the first and second language are two surface manifestations connected though, below the surface, Cummins (1981) finds that two or more languages can work at the same time without one being an obstacle to the other or burdening the brain of the user. Efficiency in L1 affects the level at which L2 is attained, as the development of communicative skills that are either common or transferable from one language to another is favored in learning (Skourtou, 2001, p. 218). According to Fragkoudaki (2007, p. 32), language learning is like an intellectual journey, an evolutionary long course, where new knowledge and experiences are added to each stage. On a cognitive level, bilingual children develop more competencies related to executive functions, showing abilities of increased selective attention and interchanging activities (Bialystok et al., 2009). The enhancement of children's abilities in L1 can lead to better academic results in L2 (Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, 2006), facilitating the overall development of their literacy skills (International Reading Association, 2001). The multiple advantages of bilingualism (Baker, 2011) also include the possibility of expanding their communication network, developing more opportunities for professional advancement and strengthening their self-confidence.

Additionally, children are allowed to understand data from social conventions and language varieties (Hudson, 1996, p. 21) of at least two languages and to distinguish individual stylistic variations. Their bilingual experiences contribute to shaping the way they perceive the world, but also their own social and cultural identity. Enhancing bilingualism thus has a dual dimension both for the individuals and for the society in which they live, as it is linked to the cultivation of more meaningful dialogue on issues of cultural, racial and linguistic diversity.

The Linguistic Diversity in the Greek School

Despite the good intentions, the use of first languages or languages of origin of all pupils and the incorporation of their teaching into education systems, including the Greek one, remains a challenge. In Greece, it is noted that the first language is not taught in admission classes, despite the legal provision (since 1996), which provided for:

- (a) the optional teaching of the native language (L1) of foreign pupils by teachers of their country of origin for four (4) hours per week, after the normal school hours though and
- (b) the recruitment of foreign teachers who are proficient both in the language of the country of origin of the pupils and the Greek language.

Similarly, Directive 77/486 of the European Communities states that: "Immigrant host countries are required to provide free education in the official language of the host country and, in parallel, in cooperation with the countries of origin, to teach the native language of migrants".

The effort to reveal the linguistic and cultural capital of foreign pupils in the classroom has become more systematic in recent years due to the increase in migratory and refugee flows as well as the rapid social, cultural and technological developments. The new L1 Curriculum for the teaching of the Greek language in Primary and Secondary Education is based on modern linguistic approaches, adopting principles of Critical Pedagogy and Critical Literacy in particular (Giroux, 1987; Luke, 2012). These principles favor the use of the different languages and varieties of all members of the class by proposing to teachers' specific teaching practices and strategies in that direction (Oikonomakou & Griva, 2014).

However, the Greek state has not yet proceeded to integrate the teaching of the first language of foreign pupils into public education. This fact causes an impact both on self-perception of students themselves, on the uninterrupted development of their linguistic skills and on their overall empowerment, as well as on the acceptance and appreciation of the general values of their culture (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000, p. 318). The causes of this phenomenon are multidimensional, but they mainly have a political and economic basis. The adoption of the assimilation model in the context of intercultural education requires everyone, irrespective of their national and cultural origins, to acquire knowledge and skills to enable them to participate in the common national culture of the host country. Assimilation is defined as "the process by which women and individuals of different ethnic or racial origins interact and participate in the daily life of wider society, without having their different origins" (Nikolaou, 2000, pp. 126-127).

Thus, in our days, we are perpetuating the perceptions that the "different" is perceived as "problem", as they are considered to hamper the progress of the others (Skourtu, 2007, p. 151). Religious beliefs, customs, music, and celebrations, which are not part of the basic structural background of society, are marginalized, under the weight of the dominant culture, or in some

cases rejected, contrary to the cultural assumptions of modern reality (Markou, 1997, pp. 223-224; Papas, 1998, p. 295).

Based on this assumption, the absorption of foreign cultures by the dominant one of the host countries is deemed necessary, as the aim is to achieve the process of culture (Pavlopoulos & Bezevegkis, 2008). Foreigners are thus treated as a special category with a cultural or linguistic deficit, as heterogeneous groups unable to keep pace with or integrate smoothly into the conventional Greek educational system. What precedes, in the wake of this perception, is their incorporation into and through the learning of the dominant language that will allow them to adapt and simply develop some survival skills in the new environment.

The second parameter that could explain the inability to implement the teaching pupils' first language programs is financial. The resources available are insufficient, as the costs that would result from the inclusion of all the spoken languages are excessive, especially in times of economic crisis. According to data from the Greek Ministry of Education (Greek Statistical Authority, 2010), for example, there were thirty-three (33) different "basic" first languages listed and others that appear in the relevant lists as "other" or "unknown", in the school year 2010-11. The increased refugee flows that have occurred since 2016 in Greece have made the situation even more complex, given two key regulatory factors. The first one concerns the frequent movements of refugees within and outside Greece due to the instability of their legal status, while the second one concerns the difficulty of systematically recording all the population in transit at the entry points, particularly of island regions.

Notably, for example, in the context of relevant recordings made for educational purposes on the island of Rhodes, where the School of Humanities of the University of the Aegean offers since 2016 Greek language courses to adults, parents of elementary school children (Kourtis-Kazoullis et al., forthcoming), the number of refugees arriving by sea in Greece during the start of the program (academic year 2016-7) is estimated at 173,450 persons (Operational Data Portal, 2017). Since then, refugee flows have been ongoing and have been maintained so far, with variations in the country of origin of migrants and refugees. Thus, the mother languages of foreigners, whose children are gradually attending schools in the country, cover a wide range, as, apart from Arab, Kurdish, and Persian, most refugees are multilingual and knowledgeable of various dialects of the wider regions where they lived before immigration. Educational planning, therefore, needs to consider several parameters related to the unstable living conditions of newly arrived people, as well as wider political and social developments.

Proposals for the Use of the Learners' First Languages in Formal Education

Educational Policies for Multilingualism

In an institutional context, it is suggested that all pupils attending admission classes, primary and secondary schools of intercultural education should attend four (04) hours of teaching of their mother language. In this way, the benefits described for bilinguals in the theoretical framework of this study will be achieved and the proclamations for equal treatment of all students will acquire substantive content. The integration of all languages will play a decisive role in meeting the real needs of pupils by enhancing procedures that will enable them to actively participate in social reality.

These courses should be compulsory and must be done during the regular school curriculum, to be equivalent to the other courses available in the current curriculum by applying the half-day schooling model.

To teach all the languages of origin and to fill in a required number of five (05) pupils per section, pupils of the same origin may be allowed to attend even from different schools. Also, it is suggested that the course in the language of origin be formally selected as a second foreign language course for the other pupils of the school. The organization and administrative responsibility of these teachings could be entrusted to the headmaster of the school and, at the management level, to the local supervisor of Educational Issues. The scientific responsibility may lie with the coordinator of the educational project to ensure the substantial support of the teachers and the immediate solution of any problems that arise.

The recruitment of teachers who will be required to teach these courses is proposed to be conducted by the Greek Ministry of Education, as is the case with other teaching staff. It is considered effective to recognize teachers' knowledge, qualifications and training that they have gained in the field of intercultural education, but also second language teaching since, as pointed out in the Report of the Scientific Committee on the Support of Children of Refugees (2017), the specialized knowledge is an important prerequisite for the success of the project. The multilingual educational material, as well as the findings tests of the educational needs of pupils, which should be created, maybe under the scientific responsibility of the Greek Institute for Educational Policy. The expenditure on teachers and teaching material (supervisory tools, writing material, etc.) is the sole responsibility of the state budget and not only of embassies, consulates, NGOs and cultural associations. This ensures that teaching interventions will become permanent rather than occasional.

Teaching Practices in Language Teaching

In addition to designing and implementing coordinated educational policies to exploit the linguistic resources of foreign pupils, it would be advisable to further strengthen, through the organization of such training for teachers, the implementation in the classroom of practices that give a meaning to the identity of all pupils in both intercultural structures and conventional mainstream education classes. In addition to the curriculum approaches proposed in the L1 Curriculum (2011), which move towards the use and exploitation of pupils' different "voices", important fields of data mining are the findings of Intercultural Education and Applied

Linguistics with an emphasis on teaching the second/foreign language.

In terms of didactic strategies (Cummins, 1999, p. 119; Chatzidaki, 2014; Oikonomakou, 2017, pp. 6-9), the planned teaching interventions could aim at:

- (a) activating the prior knowledge of pupils and exploiting/highlighting their prior knowledge;
- (b) the presentation of a cognitively attractive stimulus with the aid of appropriate framework support;
- (c) encouraging the active use of language and
- (d) the adoption of alternative techniques for assessing the learning process of children.

In particular, the implementation of these strategies is extremely important, because it is not only related to the achievement of cognitive goals in the target language but also the motivation and general encouragement and support of bilingual pupils in the school environment.

The interconnection of the experiences of multilingual pupils with the cognitive subjects of the school, the encouragement of further use of the second language, the realization of collaborative activities on the basis of their personal biographies, the increase of their involvement at different stages of the learning process can contribute to the strengthening of their identity within a democratic environment of mutual understanding (Oikonomakou, 2017; Chatzidaki, 2014). A common component of all proposals is here to increase the involvement of pupils in cooperative actions and to cultivate a holistic perception of learning based on the exchange of information and expression of experiences. Through these processes, the use of the second language is reinforced, as it favors questioning, effortless feedback/correction within the group, and enriching the vocabulary with a view of solving a problem or undertaking a joint activity (e.g., writing activity). Learning this does not take the form of standardized teaching but comes as a result of creating within the classroom a natural environment of intercultural communication.

Conclusions

The inclusion of teaching of all pupils' first language in the curriculum of the reception classes, in the intercultural schools of Primary and Secondary Education will be a very important step in promoting intercultural communication and enhancing multilingualism in education. It will serve as a springboard for combating linguistic hegemony - based on the survival of only the dominant, always by economic and political terms, languages - and will contribute to tackling ethnic-language genocide (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000) through the practical promotion of respect for linguistic and cultural diversity. With regard, in particular, to the education of refugees, the Greek state has, moreover, undertaken commitments stemming from its international contractual commitments, such as the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Greece ratified (in 1992), the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions and the Ratification of the Convention for the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (20 October 2005). A common component of these commitments is the belief that the right to education is a basic human right that all modern states must respect, protect and shield.

Based on these findings, a framework was proposed to exploit the linguistic and cultural capital of all pupils at two levels: both in the educational policy and in the teaching practices that could be applied to multilingual, conventional classes. This dual approach is imperative, because it addresses holistically the issue of respecting linguistic diversity by linking educational, formal, semi-formal or even informal structures and by activating all members of the educational community. At the same time, given the difficulties encountered in the implementation of long-term education policies that prioritize the protection of linguistic and cultural rights, this holistic approach enables teachers to integrate practices, in the teaching of their cognitive subjects that give a meaning to the benefits of bilingualism (Bialystok et al., 2009; Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, 2006) and foster intercultural communication for the benefit of all members of the school classroom. In this way, it is gradually promoted the revision of established perceptions and stereotypes for bilingual people whose linguistic wealth ceases to be an obstacle to the development of the linguistic skills of other pupils. The use of different languages in the classroom, on the contrary, through the implementation of similar teaching strategies, functions as a source of enrichment (Skourtou, 2007, p. 152), as every spoken language is now considered

as added value in the collective cultural capital, not only of the educational community but also of society in general.

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