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Focus on the Primary Language Teacher: A Study within a Greek Context

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Abstract: In recent years, the role of the primary language teacher has been broadly discussed. The phenomenon of early language learning has grown and the desire of educational authorities to implement language instruction in primary schools worldwide has raised many issues regarding the importance of educators' skills. This paper discusses the early language learning situation within a Greek context from the educator's point of view, with the aim of giving the primary language teacher a voice since they are believed to be a neglected agent of Greek education.

Keywords: Language teachers, teacher training, educational policies, public & private sector

Poslednjih godina široko se diskutuje o ulozi nastavnika jezika u osnovnim školama. Proširio se fenomen učenja jezika u ranom uzrastu, a želja stručnjaka u obrazovanju da uvedu strani jezici u osnovne škole širom sveta iznela je na videlo mnoga pitanja kao što je koliko je važno da nastavnici poseduju određene veštine. Ovaj rad se bavi učenjem jezika u ranom uzrastu u Grčkoj iz perspektive nastavnika, a sa ciljem da se čuje mišljenje nastavnika, jer se smatra da su oni zapostavljeni akteri u gračkom obrazovanju.

Ključne reči: Nastavnici jezika, trening nastavnika, obrazovne politike, javni i privatni sektor

Introduction

There has been a worldwide increasing interest in the study of language teaching to young learners. Early language learning implementation has been debated due to the popular notion of 'the younger the better'.

Behind the linguistic exterior hide political and sociocultural perspectives which influence the success or failure of the field. Enever & Moon (2009) have argued that political demands and changes of leadership can influence or change stable policy formation and continuity. The question language learning professionals must prompt themselves to ask is, whether these perspectives include pedagogical language teaching approaches successful enough to equip children for the future and benefit their present.

The present exploratory study concentrates on the reality of early language teaching within a Greek context, where the focus is on language teachers' disparity and loss of motivation due to their working environment and the perception of the wider community has towards their effort and skills. The question that arises is how effective language learning can be in an education system where state language teachers are a neglected agent and private language teachers are set with futuristic goals. The aim of the study is to give the language teachers in Greece a voice, in the hope that their working conditions will improve and continuous professional development will be initiated for them.

Greek Education Policies in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL)

It is essential that the basis of language learning is strong in order to proceed. The language teacher is crucial for successful foreign language implementation in school curricula. Unfortunately, the constant changes in the Greek education system and political instability have affected TEYL in the country. Language teachers in Greece, whether in the private or public sector, are not offered pre- or in-service training, which is vital for the development of any educator. The present situation results in new language teachers beginning their career confused and lost. Because of their lack of self-confidence language educators resort to teacher-centred approaches which they imitate from their own experience as students as will be discussed (Giannikas, 2013a).

Research Methods

The data collection took place in seven primary state schools and seven private language schools in various areas of the region of South Western Greece (the precise area of the study is not identified to maintain the anonymity of research participants). Schools were selected to reflect a range of geographical and socio-economic backgrounds. The research included observations of English language lessons in both primary state schools and private language schools, concentrating on teachers of young learners aged 7-11. Additionally, semi-structured interviews with 14 English language teachers from the participating schools (state and private) were conducted, providing the researcher with the opportunity to probe more deeply and explore the interviewee's opinions, concerns and awareness regarding teaching approaches suitable for young learners. Specific language lessons were systematically observed twice a week for one school year.

A Background Description of the Participants

The Public Sector

According to Chryshochoos & Chourdaki (2003), the 1998 Educational Reform in Greece modified procedures for the recruitment of teaching employees. From 1977-1998, teachers were placed on a waiting list to be recruited according to the date of their application for appointment in the school. The situation has now changed and selection is based on national examinations run by ASEP¹. Foreign language teachers recruited at state schools are university graduates and, according to all the language teachers interviewed, no further training is provided prior to their employment. Mainstream primary school teachers, however, are offered a pre-service course before they complete their studies at university (Giannikas, 2011). Nevertheless, based on governmental decisions, foreign language teachers in the public sector have all the accoutrements to teach at a primary state school, even though they have not been trained to do so. Those

¹ ASEP (ΑΣΕΠ: Ανώτατο Συμβούλιο Επιλογής Προσωπικού) is the Supreme Council for Personnel Selection. It is an independent commission, which is tasked with the selection of employees in the Greek public sector. ASEP is not subject to government control and is supervised by the Ministry of Administrative Reform and e-Governance.

who wish to teach in the public sector but hold a university degree of a foreign university are required to take courses at a Greek university followed by examinations. If the candidate is successful, the government then recognizes their degree of equal quality to that of a Greek university, at which point they may be considered for a teaching position at a state school. All state school teachers who participated in the study had completed their studies in Greek Universities and only one had a postgraduate degree. This is mentioned due to the fact that the procedure of selection of state school teaching personnel differs greatly from that of private language schools.

The Private Sector

According to Mattheoudakis & Alexiou (2009), a highly unique feature of foreign language education in Greece is a thriving private sector, where students attend language lessons after mainstream school. Private language schools serve the purpose of supplementing the morning language lessons, which take place in state schools. 88% of state school language learners attend lessons at private language institutions, which work in a more rapid pace using state-of-the-art teaching material. The high percentage of children who attend private language schools indicates the dissatisfaction that exists regarding language teaching in state schools. The ultimate goal at private institutions is to prepare children for future language examinations (Giannikas, 2011). Nonetheless, even though the private sector provides language learners with a more visible goal, young children fail to remain motivated as the goal of taking examinations and acquiring a language certificate is futuristic for learners of a young age. Without teacher education, the language instructors in the country are unable to rise to the challenges of primary language teaching. This could have an immediate effect on English Language Teaching (ELT) in general as children may grow to develop negative feelings regarding language learning.

Within the private sector and participants of the study, six out of seven teachers were Greek, with one being Australian of Greek descent. None of the teachers held a university degree from a Greek university; nonetheless, two language teachers had completed their studies in the United Kingdom. The other five teachers held a certificate of proficiency in English by Cambridge (CPE) and

Michigan University (ECPE) respectively. They were granted a teaching license from the Greek Ministry of Education and were only certified to teach in the private sector.

The Role of the Language Teacher in the Greek Context

State School Interview and Observation Data

State school language teachers and private language school teachers are perceived to be very different in skill by the wider community, regardless of their qualifications. Language teachers in state schools carry the stereotype of the demotivated educator with limited will of professional development due to the security they feel once commencing a career in the public sector. During interviews, however, state school teachers made it a point to emphasize the extent to which they take pride in their work. Those who have been in the profession longer claim that they have grown exhausted of the constant criticism they endure, since they feel they are not the ones to blame. They believe to be neglected lacking basic facilities and an updated course-book. They have not received training and are currently struggling with various teaching approaches suggested by the Ministry of Education. The fact that teachers have had no guidance to make any new adjustments to their practice, has increased their hesitation in introducing their own teaching material, changing teaching approaches or even applying a different seating layout (Giannikas, 2013b). Interestingly, all state school teachers mention in their interviews that they had begun their teaching at a private language school, where they were viewed in a different way and their efforts were appreciated. Nonetheless, teachers prefer a position in state schools which is permanent, in contrast to the private sector.

Based on the data collected, language educators in the public sector appear to hold general aims to be achieved by the students. Their preferred approach is teacher-centred, where the educator is guided by the course-book. Nonetheless, evidence revealed that the Ministry of Education does not obligate language educators to cover the entire course-book. Language teachers in schools are free to use any material they consider valuable, as long

as it meets students' needs. Nevertheless, none of the teachers who participated in this study used any material other than what they were supplied with. Additionally, all participant state school language teachers expressed a strong aspiration in relation to the completion of the course-book, even though they are aware that their students are often at a more advanced level than what is instructed in class due to students' exposure to the rapid pace of private language schools. This has led to students developing a negative attitude towards language learning within the specific context where there is a lack of stimulating, authentic teaching materials and tasks that could challenge children's cognitive abilities. Findings revealed that state school language teachers do not have any specific goals for their students, apart from the completion of the assigned course-book.

Private Language School Interview and Observation Data

Private language school teachers have a very dissimilar attitude towards their occupation and how their community views them as professionals. This does not necessarily mean that the English language teachers at the private sector apply different teaching approaches or are more qualified than their state schools colleagues. Some of the participant teachers do not hold a university degree, as mentioned earlier, and none of them have undergone pre/in-service teacher training. Their only type of training is in an instructive form, which includes step-by-step guidance received when language teachers are first granted a teaching position in the private sector. The participant teachers who hold a university degree view their teaching position at the private language school as temporary, since their final aim is to work for a state school in order to guarantee professional stability.

Based on the data, private language school teachers have certain privileges state school teachers do not possess. One very important advantage was the fact that they were equipped with a wider range of facilities, which made their work uncomplicated compared to state school language lessons. Conveniences such as televisions, CD players and computers gave the classroom a different environment, which brought about a positive response from the students. Furthermore, since language educators are not provided with pre- or in-service

training, owners of private language schools supply English language teachers with a detailed curriculum for every class they would be teaching every school year. The private language school teachers have clear goals of what they are expected to accomplish with each class; however, the goals set are not age appropriate, meaning that the basic aim is preparation for language examination, which students are expected to take when they were in secondary school.

The Outcome of the Negligence of Professional Development

The current investigation revealed that the negligence of the professional developmental process may be one of the reasons that teachers are entrapped in their outdated teaching methods and approaches. The language teachers of both sectors are familiar with the benefits of student-centred environments but are not aware of how to apply them in their classes, which could change if language teachers were exposed to professional training. According to evidence gathered from interviews, the language instructors who participated in this study, were unsure of the best technique to apply so as to attend to their students' learning needs, teachers felt a sense of security when being guided by a course-book. Therefore, one may argue that the Educational Reform of 1998 was not complete since not all aspects of education were contended with. In agreement with Diaz-Maggioli (2003:1) who argues that:

[...] professional development has become increasingly important as a way to ensure that teachers succeed in matching their teaching goals with their students' learning needs. In the case of second language teachers, professional development is needed to enable them to help their students develop proficiency in the target language and an understanding of the cultures associated with that language.

It appears that private language school teachers feel they are providing their students with an education that will help and prepare them for the future, which is considered purposeful and reassuring. In contrast, the state school language teachers feel neglected and have been driven to believe that their professional efforts have no objective. State school language teachers have stated in their interviews that language learners are not fulfilled with their language education in

the public sector; as a result, students are forced to put all their hope and effort in learning English in the private sector, even though different approaches to language learning are not implemented. They are offered a more pleasant learning environment and a clear goal of what they are expected to accomplish, however, they are still encouraged to view language as another school subject rather than a means of communication.

Gabrielatos (2001:11) makes a valid point when stating that “since there are quick and easy routes to *becoming* a language teacher, ELT is regarded by many as a fairly low-status occupation, and language teachers are often treated as mere *materials operators* in need of simple and easy-to-use miracle methods”. The point Gabrielatos makes provides the literature with a valid description of the language learning situation in Greece, and is in agreement with the evidence gathered in this investigation. Nevertheless, according to the Ministry of Education, foreign language teachers in the public sector have all the skills needed to teach in a state primary school. The puzzling question of why language lessons in state schools are not considered equivalent by pupils and the broader community, since the government asserts teachers are fully qualified remains unanswered. The frustration of poor facilities and working conditions have led language educators from motivated to indifferent. One may argue that even if there are a lack of facilities, having the appropriate training can aid language instructors with this complex process. Lee (2007:321) has argued that “through reflection, pre-service teachers become more aware of themselves as would-be teachers and of the pedagogical context that impinges directly on teaching and learning”. If teachers are provided with a focus on development of reflection from the start of their *learning-to-teach* process, it will help them advance and progress in their profession.

Conclusion

Language instructors have the demanding task of expanding their learners' knowledge and cognitive skills in the sphere of language and culture. Their goal should be to allow children to make sense of the world around them and beyond their own community, in order to be able to communicate across cultural and

linguistic borders. Studies such as this can supply language learning in Greece with rich data which could facilitate its development. The current research supports that language learning is an important aspect of education and can be improved with the appropriate teaching material and professional training. This could help state school language teachers regain the self-belief needed to deliver productive language lessons. Private language school teachers can also feel more confident using various teaching approaches, gain fulfillment and consider themselves something more than language educators who prepare their students for language examinations.

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