



Greek as a Second/Foreign Language for Children with a Refugee and/or Migrant Background: Language Policy under the Microscope

Konstantinos D. Chatzidimou, Foteini Kalogerogianni

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

Abstract

Already since the mid-20th century, the industrial societies of the European North have witnessed the phenomenon of movement and relocation of people, which is due either to refugee flows, or to the forced or voluntary migration of people seeking better professional prospects. Over the last three decades, this phenomenon has spread to countries in the European South. Greece is a case in point as it is a gateway to the countries of the European Union, receiving considerable numbers of refugees and/or migrants and exporting migrants to the European North. As a result, the implementation of policies for the educational reception and integration of children with a refugee and/or migrant background is a major challenge for the Greek state. The present paper focuses on the language education of children with a refugee and/or migrant background in Greece approaching bilingualism as an important asset in today's multilingual society. The emergence of bilingualism or multilingualism raises the question about language maintenance or language shift of refugee and/or migrant populations as to which of the two developments is the appropriate strategy in terms of the educational and social integration of these populations. Without overlooking the influence of a family's practices on the issue of language education, school policy has a significant impact on the way students are linguistically educated in a way that leads to the acquisition of the language competence that a citizen of a modern democratic society needs to be able to participate with relative self-reliance and adequacy in communication. After a brief overview of the policies implemented in Greece in the last decades regarding the education of children with a refugee and/or migrant background, some thoughts are presented approaching the language education of these children in Greek schools as an educational challenge of great importance.

Keywords: Intercultural Education, Second/Foreign Language Teaching, Language Education, Language Policy

1. Introduction

Intercultural-inclusive education as a basic dimension in the design of modern educational programmes for children from different backgrounds is a major challenge for today's educational systems. This approach focuses on learning as the main vehicle for a functional cultural transition of children in their first and/or second host country and at the same time values the different identities that each student brings with him/her [1]. Although the Greek educational system has traditionally had a strong monocultural orientation [2], its practices seem to be shifting towards a direction of recognizing and promoting bilingualism and/or multilingualism, at least from a theoretical point of view. Moreover, emphasis has been placed in recent years on the teaching and learning of Greek as a second/foreign language, with the aim of providing foreign students with the linguistic competence that will help them more broadly in understanding the world and acquiring the skills necessary for the modern competent democratic citizen. Both school and family language strategies [3] play an important role in achieving this goal, as the latter has a significant influence on the degree of the child's participation in the new educational and social reality.

It should be noted that modern migration to European countries such as Greece has increased due to the escalation of wars in the Middle East, the neo-liberal economic policy and growing hopelessness among refugees. The fact that Greece as a country was not ready in various aspects to receive so many migrants is demonstrated by the story of camps like Moria on Lesbos. Moreover, the critical collapse of the Greek economy in 2008, the strict policies of containment and the rise of a virulent and racist neo-nazi movement ("Golden Dawn" rose electorally in the period of the economic crisis and from 2012 to 2019 it was represented in the Greek Parliament; in 2020, "Golden Dawn" was



unanimously judged to be a criminal organization, and its leaders have been convicted of running it) can be seen as factors that have accentuated the need for better planning and for actions to help improve the lives of these people. Therefore, it is vital that they are provided with every possible skill that will contribute to their escape from the difficult situation they find themselves in.

2. Language policy in Greece for children with a refugee and/or migrant background

Greek educational policy sets the formation of the intercultural-inclusive school of the 21st century as a basic goal of its educational system. To this aim, it reinforces the school units with Reception Preparatory Classes for primary and secondary pupils who do not know Greek or speak it only at a rudimentary level. In addition, Reception and Refugee Education Facilities (DYEP) have been established, which, as a rule, operate in the school premises during the afternoon hours as an early stage of integration of children in the educational process through the learning of Greek as a second and/or foreign language, psycho-social support and identity strengthening. At the same time, interpretation services, teaching and learning material, and teachers' training on issues related to education and the inclusion of pupils from different backgrounds into the school environment are meant to be provided [4], at least on a theoretical level. Nevertheless, in the field of research on issues regarding the education of refugees and immigrants in Greece, significant obstacles to the effective inclusion of these pupils into the educational system (and society in general) can be observed. These obstacles are mainly due to the lack of appropriate educational material and teacher training, the pupils' situation (traumatic experiences, long periods of de-schooling, lack of familiarity with Greek and difficult living conditions), and the contact between the families of these children and the school [5]. Reflecting on the policies and practices that should be implemented regarding the education of migrants and/or refugees, issues concerning the co-education of students or the attendance of preparatory classes before integration into the typical class – and, consequently, the way of teaching especially the Greek language – are highlighted. The necessity of learning Greek or English as the language they will need most in their lives, the gap between the proclamation and the actual teaching of Greek or English as a second/foreign language, and the distance between the theoretical announcements and the actual teaching of Greek or English are issues to be discussed. Incorporating interculturality as a principle that permeates the school environment implies the recognition of the needs and identities of the "other", which should be considered in various aspects: designing curricula, writing of school textbooks, planning the initial and in-service teachers' training, and the making of educational policy in general – this remains a desideratum. In this process, an overemphasis of the different identities is to be avoided. The focus ought to be on the enrichment of students' multiple identities and the acquisition of the skills necessary to function as tomorrow's citizens in a complex world [7].

3. Greek as a second/foreign language: research data

The teaching of Greek as a second and/or foreign language is a field of research interest, both theoretical and practical, which has showed significant development in Greece in recent years. One of the indicators of the increasing interest in this field is the teachers' awareness within the framework of their initial or further education, as the number of courses offered in this subject at university departments responsible for educating prospective teachers at both under- and postgraduate level is increasing significantly. At the same time, several continuing education and in-service training programmes related to this subject are offered for the professional development of teachers. At a theoretical level, the distinction between second and foreign languages is related, among other factors, to which language a child learns first. What usually happens is that the learning of the mother tongue comes first, followed by the learning of a foreign language which may eventually become a second language. However, this temporal sequence is not always observed in children with a migrant/refugee background, as in this case the learning of the foreign language may take place before, at the same time or after the learning of the second language [8]. For children with a migrant/refugee background coming to Greece at a school age, perceptions of what constitutes a first and a second language may differ as opposed to migrant/refugee children who are born in Greece. Family language practices may influence children's perception of Greek as first or "heritage" language as well as their attitudes toward linguistic assimilation or heritage language maintenance [9]. As to the positive effects of bilingualism in word recognition and reading comprehension research data indicate that literacy patterns (monoliteracy vs. biliteracy) may influence the results [10, 11].



On a practical level, teaching models of second and/or foreign languages have been developed and applied in the case of Greek, while teaching and learning material has been produced to meet the needs of teaching Greek as a second and/or foreign language, mainly through the implementation of programmes related to the educational inclusion of foreign and returning students, Greek diaspora students and, more recently, students with a refugee/migrant background.

Although some research data about teachers' attitudes and perceptions as to the benefits of bilingualism and the necessity of incorporating heritage language teaching into the main curriculum are found [12], data about the competence of learners of Greek as a second/foreign language are rather scarce and fragmentary. Research data on teachers of Greek as a second/foreign language indicate that only a few of them can be considered as interculturally competent, which might have as a result that many teachers do not utilize cultural variety in their classroom as a beneficial condition for learning [13].

4. Family language policy and language competence in modern democratic societies

The impact of family language policy [3] on intra-family communication plays an important role in the development of bilingualism and interlanguage competence of children with a migrant/refugee background. Adopting practices that only reinforce first language learning and usage may work to inhibit broader state language policies, while adopting multiple language usage strategies contributes to the development of early bilingualism [14, 15]. This need to link the macro- with the micro-level is highlighted in recent surveys on parents and students with a refugee and/or migrant background in Greece [16].

Language competence, which encompasses the linguistic and communicative competence of the learner and makes her/him a learning agent, is a prerequisite for the development of the communicative competence necessary for understanding and participating in the modern world. Adequate knowledge and management of the language in which communication is conducted in a modern state in all its four dimensions – listening, speaking, reading, and writing – is essential for the full participation of the student and future citizen in society. In the modern era, where the concept of citizenship [17] is expanding, as it is strongly characterized by mobility, a new identity of citizenship is taking shape with elements of universality [18], focusing not only on a state's official language, but on more languages, since the individual ensures direct access to the international sphere of communication through the learning and adequate use of a second and/or third language. In the case of pupils with a migrant/refugee background who start from a different linguistic heritage, the school needs to find ways to help them learn the official language of the state, so that it becomes the linguistic instrument in which they can become proficient, a condition necessary to ensure equality of educational opportunities. At the same time, it should also promote the learning of other languages to broaden their communication skills at a European and universal level [19].

5. Conclusion and further perspectives

Recent research on the school integration of pupils with a migrant/refugee background points to the key role of learning the language of the host country, which also happens to be the language of the school, in the pupil's academic achievement. In school programmes for the inclusion of refugee pupils in Greek education, priority is indeed given to the learning of the Greek language, without, however, having any measurable results of this effort at a country level to date. Given that Greece has only become a refugee host country a few years ago and given that a significant proportion of refugees consider Greece as a stopover point for their transition to one of the economically prosperous countries of the European North, it is necessary, in addition to the emphasis on the Greek language, that students acquire proficiency in at least one of the foreign languages taught in Greek schools (English, French, German). Further research that would investigate the degree of proficiency of students with a migrant/refugee background in both Greek and foreign languages is necessary.

References

- [1] Michail, D., Sakellariou, A., Gogonas, N. (eds.) "Refugees and education. Field studies and theoretical issues", Thessaloniki, Stamoulis publications, 2020 [in Greek].
- [2] Kanavakis, M. "Educational policy models for the management of socio-educational problems in modern societies", 2011 [in Greek].



- [3] Andritsou, M. & Chatzidimou, K. "Family Language Policy: Interdisciplinary Components of an Emerging Research Field in regard to Childhood Bilingualism", 10th International Conference "The Future of Education", Virtual Edition, Bologna, Filodiritto, 2020, pp. 551-556.
- [4] Details for the key elements of refugee educations are presented in the formal site of the Ministry of Education <https://www.minedu.gov.gr/ekpaideysi/refug-educ>.
- [5] Stergiou, L. & Simopoulos, G. "After the Container. An Intercultural Look at Refugee Education", Athens, Gutenberg, 2019 [in Greek].
- [6] <https://paratiritirio.edu.gr/sinigoros-ekpaideysi-prosfygwn/>
- [7] Markou, G. "Intercultural education", Athens, 2010 [in Greek].
- [8] Matsagou, M. "English as a foreign language in non-English-speaking countries. The case of Greek teachers of English as a foreign language to refugee and migrant children", Unpublished Master's Thesis, 2020.
- [9] Griva, E., Kiliari, A. & Stamou, A. "Exploring views on heritage language use and bilingual acquisition: quantitative and qualitative evidence from teachers and immigrant students in the Greek context", *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 38(10), 2017, pp. 886-900.
- [10] Rothou, K. & Tsimpli, I. "Biliteracy and reading ability in children who learn Greek as a second language", *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 23(8), 2020, pp. 1036-1050.
- [11] Skourtou, E. "Some notes about the relationship between Bilingualism and Literacy concerning the teaching of Greek as a second language", *European Journal of Intercultural studies*, 6(2), 1995, pp. 24-30.
- [12] Gkaintartzi, A., Kiliari, A. & Tsokalidou, R. "'Invisible' bilingualism – 'invisible' language ideologies: Greek teachers' attitudes towards immigrant pupils' heritage languages", *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 18(1), 2015, pp. 60-72.
- [13] Magos, K. & Simopoulos, G. "'Do you know Naomi?': researching the intercultural competence of teachers who teach Greek as a second language in immigrant classes", *Intercultural Education*, 20(3), 2009, pp. 255-265.
- [14] Tsagadas, A. "Research on the teaching of Greek as a second/foreign language (2000-2015). Publications, thematic fields and basic results", Unpublished Master's Thesis, 2021.
- [15] Choreva, F. "Teaching Greek as a second/foreign language to refugee children. Difficulties in acquisition and educational practices. The views of Philologists of the Ioannina district", Unpublished Master Thesis, 2019.
- [16] Theodoropoulou, Th. "Curriculum for the teaching of Greek as a second/foreign language to refugee children of age 6-12 for Levels A1-A2", Unpublished Master Thesis, 2019.
- [17] Strantzali, K. & Tsioumis, K. "Citizenship education in the modern multicultural kindergarten: Social issues and social action. An action research", 20th Conference of Cicea, Warsaw, 2018.
- [18] Sellars, M. "Pedagogy: Educating for Global Competence. In *Educating Students with Refugee and Asylum Seeker Experiences: A Commitment to Humanity*", Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2020, pp. 140-154.
- [19] Kalogerogianni, F. "Main language, citizenship, communicative competence, foreign language students and bilingual students", *Nea Paideia*, 182, 2022, pp. 116-131 [in Greek].