

# THE REPRESENTATIONS OF GREEK LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN LINGUISTICALLY AND CULTURALLY DIVERSE CLASSROOMS OF ATHENS

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## Introduction

The starting point of the present thesis is the observation of last decade's school reality. Inflows of immigrants that started during the 80s changed the constitution of Greek school "landscape". Nowadays, the massive arrival of immigrants and refugees in Greece, makes the allophone students' reception and integration an urgency with many facets. Bouzon-Fradet (1997: 36) notes that it is at the same time a "cultural, structural, didactic and pedagogical" challenge. Besides, the cultures that are originated elsewhere have serious differences from the national culture in the practices, the perceptions, the history and are, in fact, the reason for the evolution of the pedagogical methodologies (Abdallah-Preteuille and Porcher, 1996: 18).

This study investigates the relation between the teaching of Greek as the language of the host country and the cultural diversity of school publics in Greece. Cummins (2005: 49) suggests that the students' good performances are determined by the utilization of their linguistic and cultural capitals during the teaching of the language.

Our study focuses on the teaching of the Greek language in the lower level of secondary education (gymnasium), since it is a prerequisite for the school progress of students, as well as for their social and professional advancement. The language of instruction can either be of a forced or a gratifying type in an integrative perspective for the allophone students (Chiss, 1997: 63). Thus, our study aims to examine the Greek language teachers' representations, in the gymnasium, asking the following pertinent question:

**How do the teachers handle the teaching of the Greek language in relation to the linguistic and cultural characteristics of their students?** We are also interested in some sub-issues regarding the goals and the practices of the teachers, the difficulties that they face, as well as the way of perceiving and handling their students' language and culture of origin.

## The research

- ✓ The **tool** of our qualitative study was the semi-structured interview (duration: 20 minutes – 1 hour)
- ✓ **Execution period:** 9/5/2014-26/6/2014
- ✓ **Participants:** 15 teachers of Greek language and literature from 9 gymnasiums
- ✓ **Location:** At schools of the following areas: Kypseli, Agios Nikolaos, Larisa Station, Aspropyrgos, Menidi
- ✓ **Composition of the classrooms at the center of Athens:** low number of Greek students, Albanians, Georgians, Bulgarians, Romanians, Russians, Polish, Ukrainians, Pakistanis, Syrians, Egyptians, Nigerians, Moldavians, Indians etc.
- ✓ **Composition of the classrooms at the periphery:** repatriated students from Russia or from Kazakhstan, Greeks, Albanians, Rom, Pakistanis, Russians, Turkish, Indians etc.
- ✓ **Qualitative data analysis:** transcription, analysis, interpretation, synthesis
- ✓ **Criteria:** Intensity, extension, answers' frequency

## Results

Main results of this study and indicative answers from the teachers:

### 1. Lesson's goals (1<sup>st</sup> axis)

- Linguistic objectives (language structure, comprehension, dictation, grammar, vocabulary), low expectations
- Occasional connection with social objectives

*"I set very low goals, I know that".*

*"We reach a certain point. We can't quite move forward in these classes and we find that basic communication in everyday life comes first".*

*"For me, what matters in the language class is the relationship, the respectful ambiance, the freedom, so that anyone can express themselves".*

### 2. Difficulties (2<sup>nd</sup> axis)

#### I) Didactic difficulties

- The writing skills of students, the "difficult and chaotic" Greek modern textbook
- "They usually answer orally, they have a hard time with written language".*
- "You have to select your teaching subject, or else the students will be confused because of the textbook".*

#### II) Exterior factors

- The financial situation, the familial problems, the insufficient preparation in elementary school, the low educational level of the family, the use of a different language, the learning disabilities, the technology etc.
- "The students have survival issues, the language isn't their priority".*
- "I want to know if they have parents and if they are unemployed. Everything they tell me about their families, I try to remember".*
- "In elementary school they don't teach them any useful rules. They come to secondary with many gaps in grammar. It's impossible to make up for them".*

#### III) Difficulties of allophones

- The allophone students' writing skills sometimes are perceived as equal to the native students' and other times, they are perceived as inferior.
  - In particular, the excellence of the Albanian students, who are "eager for integration and assimilation" is highlighted.
- "Both Greeks and foreigners have a low level".*
- "Second generation foreign students represent the largest percentage of all students, that doesn't mean, though, that they know and use well the Greek language, since they speak Greek here, but Albanian at home".*

### 3. Teaching methods (3<sup>rd</sup> axis)

#### I. General teaching methods

- Frontal teaching (but a lot of the teachers are justified for that)
  - Interactive teaching
- "I would like to use more innovative methods but it's not possible with these kids. I use the traditional method but I ask a lot of questions and I try to include everyone in these 40 minutes that the didactic period lasts"*
- "In classes where the students are weak, the team work helps a lot because they help each other and they feel more secure. The good students don't want that".*

#### II. Teaching methods for allophone students

- Explanation, repetition and use of synonyms for the comprehension needs of the allophones
  - Other solutions are seldom referred: the meticulous correction of the allophones' writing tasks, the help during the break, the systematic contact with the parents.
  - Recession towards the linguistic difficulties of allophones
- "You explain, simplify so that they understand even the simplest things, but we don't have high expectations from these students".*
- "You can't do anything if they don't understand. Besides tutoring, other strategies don't work".*

### 4. Mother tongue (4<sup>th</sup> axis)

#### I. Its place

- Devaluation of the mother tongue, ban of the mother tongue's use in class
- A useful practice of intermediation among students who are speaking the same language in class
- The abandonment of the mother tongue in favor of the appropriation of the language of instruction and the integration of the allophone students
- The insufficient mastery of the mother tongue and the language of instruction reinforce the sentiment of non-belonging to the students.

*"Of course they speak their mother tongue and it's their right to use it. But not at school, during the lesson, or with their classmates, otherwise they will not be open to the Greek language".*

*"No, I do not allow it because you can't control what is happening, what they're saying".*

*"When they go to Albania this summer, the others mock them because they don't speak well their language and they feel really bad, it puts a lot of pressure on them".*

#### II. The influence of the mother tongue

- The knowledge's impact on the acquisition of the language of instruction: it is considered more neutral or non-existent, rarely positive.
- "I don't think it affects anything the fact that they speak another language".*

*"It's an asset and I tell them. It's like their brain is a well that gets filled with water from multiple sources".*

### 5. Culture of origin (5<sup>th</sup> axis)

- The non-designation of the students' cultural particularities
- Stereotypical perception of the culture of origin
- The treatment of all students like they're Greeks, as a proof of equality

*"No, the cultural differences don't show unless we do activities about multiculturalism".*

*"For example, 3 years go by and if I don't see the last name I may not understand that the pupil is a foreigner. The differences aren't visible and we do not put on labels".*

*"I think they want to talk about their habits and customs. We noticed it when we compared traditions between our country and theirs".*

*"Albanians never say anything about their customs etc. I'm wondering now. I don't know if that's good or bad".*

### 6. Relationships between students (6<sup>th</sup> axis)

- **At the schools in the center of Athens:** positive ambiance and contribution of the teachers in creating a positive ambiance

*"There is no tension during the language course. It goes on exactly like it would if we had only Greek students, there is no rivalry".*

*"We aim to include topics such as racism, but discreetly. We're trying to convey indirectly such messages to teenagers".*

- **At the schools in the periphery of Athens:** Intense cultural controversies during the language course, the teachers cannot influence them.

*"During the language course, a lot of negative comments are made in the face of the Rom students, because being a repatriated from Russia here, is like the rule".*

*"When it comes to the topic of racism, there is an intense controversy. I've heard extreme opinions: Why do the foreigners take our jobs? After that, the immigrants are very reserved and discreet. They answer calmly while our students (the Greeks) are much more aggressive".*

*"The school doesn't influence them in the slightest, they have already formed opinions from their families".*

## Conclusion

There is no particular mention of differentiations in teaching that would answer the needs of the allophone students. According to the answers, exterior factors mainly impact the teaching which seems to be often strictly limited and exclusively focused on elementary linguistic objectives. The use of the mother tongue in class stresses the teachers since they find that it causes negative and uncontrollable situations. Even if the culture of origin's approach is superficial and fragmentary, there is at least a tendency to integrate it in the language classroom.

Finally, the teachers' answers are generally accompanied by embarrassment possibly, due to the poor handling of the existent heterogeneity. However, overall, we note in their answers a humanitarian intention and a warm observation or approach towards the problems of alterity; to add to that, it would be beneficial for the teachers to receive a complementary and deeper instruction in the intercultural education.

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