

An Internet-based Learning Environment for the Teaching of Greek as a Second Language through Literary Texts: Theory and Practice

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This paper describes an Internet-based learning environment for the teaching/learning of Greek as a second language which is based on specific theories of language learning and pedagogical orientations. The content of the teaching/learning of Greek is based on literature. The lessons focus on language, meaning and use and emphasis is placed on the creative comprehension and production of literary texts by the students. This specific environment was created as a result of the program of the Greek Ministry of Education and Religions, “Integration of Repatriate and Immigrant children in School — for Primary Education” and designed specifically for Albanian and Russian-speaking students initially, although it can be expanded in the future to include other languages as well. It is hosted on a moodle, created especially for the needs of the specific program.

1. Introduction

This paper demonstrates the relationship between theory and practice by outlining an Internet-based language learning environment that was designed and constructed by the authors of this paper for the teaching of Greek as a second language in primary schools. It was created as part of the program of the Ministry of National Education and Religions, “Integration of Repatriate and Immigrant Children in School — for Primary Education”¹ and designed initially for Albanian and Russian-speaking students, but can be expanded to include prompts in other languages as

¹ Programme: “Ενταξη παιδιών παλλινοστούντων και αλλοδαπών στο ελληνικό σχολείο για την Α/θμια Εκπαίδευση”.

well.² It is hosted on a moodle (<http://195.251.185.15/moodle>), created especially for the needs of the specific program. Entitled, *To Ταξίδι του Ήλιου* (“The Journey of the Sun”), it signifies the universality of the sun for every person and thing. This specific application is discussed in this paper in relation to theory and practice, an issue that has long been discussed in the field of Applied Linguistics as well as in the field of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). Emphasis is placed on the choice of content, as is evident in the theoretical framework, which is based on second language learning through literary texts.

2. Relating theory to practice

CALL applications have been based on a variety of approaches including: (a) “top-down” which is based on a specific theory or theories; (b) “down-up” which is based on a specific problem; and (c) new technological advances such as new software (Levy, 1997). The application described in this paper is based on specific theories of second language learning but also takes into consideration the available software as well as specific problems that immigrant students encounter when learning Greek.

The interaction between language teaching in practice and theory is neither simple nor straightforward (Stern, 1991:35). Rees-Miller discusses whether theory leads to practice or practice leads to theory or whether there is a symbiotic relationship where theory and practice interact (Rees-Miller, 2001:640). Stern refers extensively to conceptual frameworks relating theory to practice by outlining models such as those of Campbell (1980), Spolsky (1978), Ingram (1980), Mackey (1970) and Stevens (1977) (in Stern, 1991:35–51). Stern (1991:23) points to the discrepancy between theory and practice in language learning/teaching stating that the most important criterion is usefulness and applicability (Stern, 1991:27). Richards and Rogers outline the history of language teaching, stating that from the 1940s on more systematic methods have been used in order to unite theory with practice (1986:14). Earlier, Antony (1963) conceived three levels of organisation: approach, method and technique, in an effort to explain the relationship between the assumptions dealing with the nature of language and learning and practice.

In the field of CALL, the same question remains: what relationship does theory have to practice? Chapelle believes that the problem lies in deciding which theories of language and pedagogy prove useful (1997:13). She states that design features can be generated from relevant SLA theory (Chapelle, 1998:22) while Hegelheimer and Chapelle (2000:42) outline the relationship of SLA theory to CALL materials and empirical research.

² It was designed for grades 5 and 6.

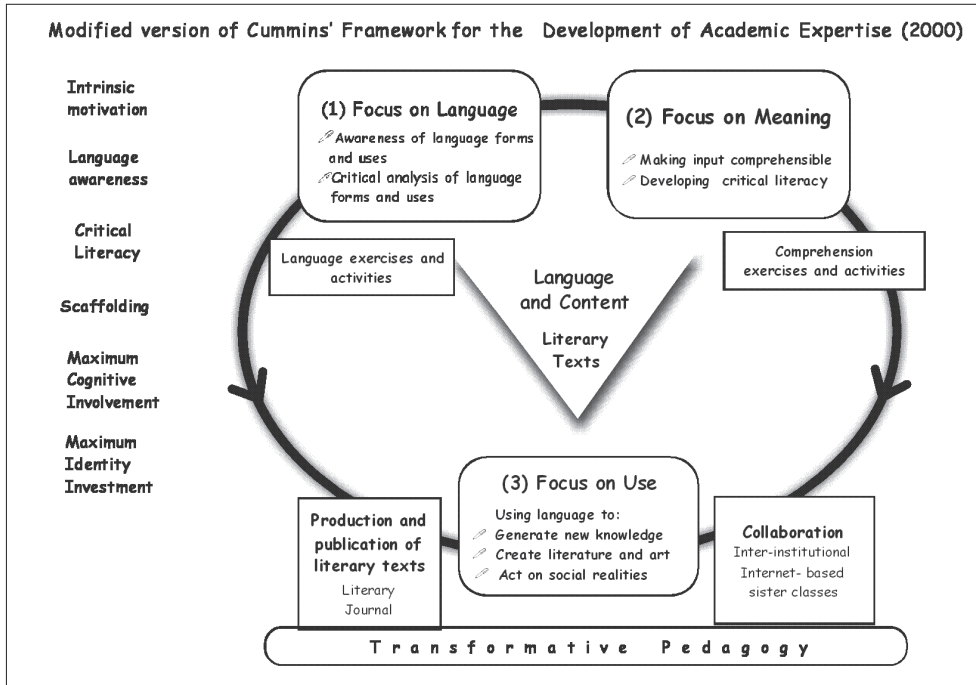
3. The Program: “Integration of Repatriate and Immigrant children in School — for Primary Education”

As this particular application was designed for a specific program, factors other than theory had to be taken into consideration. The application had to coincide with the philosophy and goals of the specific program, “Integration of Repatriate and Immigrant Students in School for Primary Education” which was implemented by the Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs of Greece and the University of Athens and designed mainly to provide all those conditions required, which ensure equal opportunities for all students entering all stages of education. The program as a whole deals with areas such as assessment of existing legislation, the formation of an institutional framework for multiculturalism, social and psychological support for the students, training of teachers, the creation of educational curriculum and teaching materials, second language learning support, etc. “The Journey of the Sun” is a small part of the vast curriculum and teaching materials created over the years of the program’s implementation since 1997. It was created as part of the actions that took place in the area of the South Aegean.³

4. Theoretical Framework

The Internet-based language learning environment “The Journey of the Sun” was designed according to a particular theoretical framework as described below. Teaching/learning is based on three foci — focus on language, focus on meaning and focus on use — as outlined in Cummins’ Framework for the Development of Academic Expertise (2000:273–280) as well as other factors such as intrinsic motivation, language awareness, critical literacy, scaffolding, maximum cognitive involvement and maximum identity investment as outlined by Cummins in other theories and in intersecting theories proposed by others such as the New London Group (1996). The pedagogical orientation is transformative (Cummins, 2000:260–269) which stresses collaborative critical inquiry, critical literacy and active, rather than passive, involvement in social realities. Another facet of transformative pedagogy is the creation of art and literature by second language learners. The student is thereby an active and creative participant in the education process rather than a passive “receptor” of knowledge. For this reason, the central element in the proposed framework is literature (see figure 1).

³ Associate Professor Eleni Skourtou, University of the Aegean, was responsible for the area of the South Aegean.

Figure 1: *Theoretical Framework*

Another factor that was considered in the design of the theoretical framework was the type of proficiency students need. The history of second/foreign language teaching methodology reflects the recognition of what types of proficiency learners need (Richards and Rogers, 1986:1). In the case of immigrant students, conversational skills are acquired relatively quickly. Research suggests that a short period of time (less than two years) is usually required for immigrant students to attain peer-appropriate levels of proficiency in conversational aspects of their second language (Gonzalez, 1986; Snow and Hoefnager-Hoehle, 1978, both in Cummins, 2001) as the students are immersed in an environment where the language is spoken. However, academic language proficiency is much more difficult to acquire as five to seven years are needed for immigrant students to reach levels of comparable native speakers (Cummins, 2001:74–75). For this reason, the students must be provided with the appropriate prompts or scaffolding to help them reach these levels (Vygotsky, 1978). This is where the appropriate software or Internet-based language learning environments can help by providing comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981) in the target language. As students are facilitated in reading academic texts, they are apt to read more. The power of reading has been acknowledged by many researchers in developing academic language proficiency (Krashen, 1993; Elley, 1991). The material that students read can be of various genres; however, literature specifically provides many possibilities for development of academic proficiency as it can be a source of complex sentence structures and infrequent vocabulary as well as imagination and creativity (Ada, 1988).

4.1. The power of literature

In this particular application, second language learning focuses on target language literary texts. For example, the first three lessons are based on an excerpt from Angeliki Varella's book "*Δώσε την αγάπη*" ("Give Love") which describes activities in a multicultural classroom and two poems by Rena Karthaiou in her collection of poems "*Στα μονοπάτια του ήλιου*" ("On the Path of the Sun").

The medium of literary texts was chosen for several reasons. Literature can provide the environment for creative language comprehension and production. It can be a source of aesthetic entertainment, as well as a source of aesthetic and creative development. The enjoyment that results from reading a text is the basic aim of literature, which entertains because it presents various aspects of reality and corresponding experiential and emotional situations. It rouses the interest of the reader and it gives him/her the possibility of viewing reality in a different way. As such, it leads to situations of internal fulfilment or completeness. It also leads the reader to question and critically examine reality because it highlights fundamental issues that occupy the human being. This leads to self-knowledge because it portrays human instances of happiness or sadness or presents moments of moral exaltation and moments of despair. At the same time, it portrays the person as he/she acts under the influence of biological, economic and social factors or the value systems and the various codes that govern his/her life. Moreover, it aids in the development of language because it supplies the reader with new vocabulary and varied linguistic structures that lead to effective communication, oral as well as written (Glazer, 1991). It transmits moral values and provides models because it portrays heroes which represent the "ideal" as well as characters to be avoided.

Most important is the contribution of literature to the development of imagination. Frye (2001) states that the basic function of imagination is to allow the individual to produce an aspect of society that he/she wants to experience, independent of the society in which he/she lives. According to Sloan (1991), a well-developed imagination is fundamental in order for one to survive in a healthy society. Literature improves imagination because the reader takes part in literary experiences. He/she realises the basic wishes and needs of other persons and is made aware of their problems, their values and their behaviour. Thus, he/she experiences a more structured picture of life. At the same time, literature promotes the intellectual growth of readers. The reader develops the faculty of comprehension and critical thought so that he/she is able to reason and face problems successfully.

Through literature, the reader can hypothesise, make comparisons, categorise objects, and organise his/her thoughts (Glazer, 1991). It contributes to the further development of the personality of the reader because it strengthens self-perception, self-confidence and the ego while it teaches the reader to recognise the value of others, independent of sex, nationality or race, and it helps him/her to externalise his/her feelings or emotions.

Literature plays an important role in the social and moral development of the reader. It helps him/her to develop social relations, to relate himself/herself to other persons and to become aware of other points of view. It offers the reader experiences because it constitutes a rich source of data from which the reader can draw information. He/she is led to make conclusions that are useful for herself/himself and for society (Papantonakis, 2006). He/she observes different models of behaviour and learns to distinguish — but also value — the diversity amongst people. It helps the reader to discover moral issues because literature presents examples of moral behaviour. This can help the reader to regulate his/her own behaviour proportionally.

4.2. Literature in second language teaching/learning

Bouvet and Close (2006) refer to the benefits of reading in a hypertextual environment and outline a variety of ICT applications. Carter and McRae (1996) provide support for the effective use of literature in second or foreign language classrooms. McKay (1987:191–193) gives rationales for using literature in the second language learning curriculum: (a) it can be useful in developing linguistic knowledge; (b) to the extent that students enjoy reading literature, it may increase their motivation to interact with a text thus increasing reading proficiency; (c) it may increase their understanding of the culture that the particular language represents; and (d) it can promote the learners' own creativity. She quotes Frye (1964:77 in McKay, 1987:193): "It is clear that the end of literary teaching is not simply the admiration of literature; it's something more like the transfer of imaginary energy from literature to the students". This aspect ties in with the theoretical framework for the Internet-based language learning environment outlined in this paper as students are encouraged to become writers themselves and publish their work on the moodle provided.

5. The Internet-based language learning environment: "The Journey of the Sun"

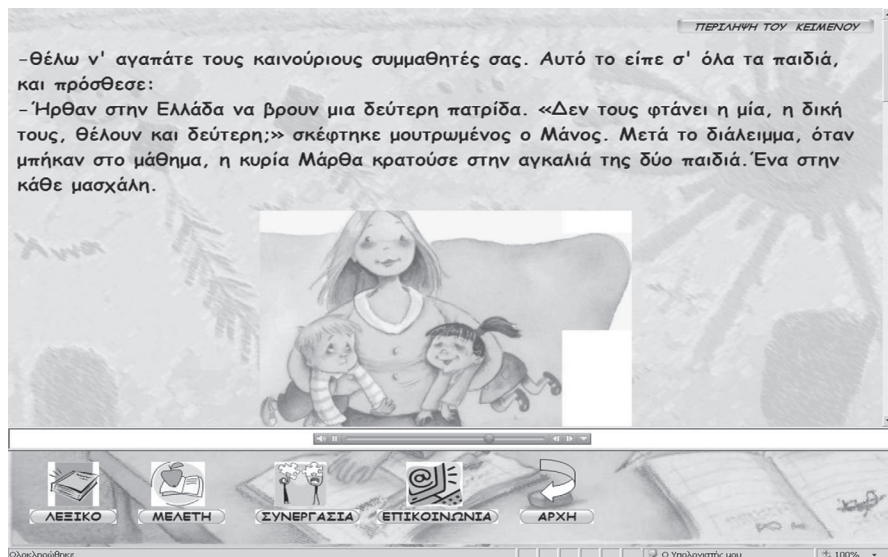
The title, "The Journey of the Sun", was chosen specifically as it symbolises universality. The sun travels to every part of the earth; everyone is the same under the sun.

Students are advised to follow the journey of the sun through the Internet-based language learning environment and through the literary texts that are available. They are asked to choose their language on the first page, i.e. Albanian or Russian. Then they are invited to follow the sun on its journey and are asked to choose where they want to travel (i.e. to which literary text): to the classroom of love, to find a kite or to meet the child of the sun? This leads to three corresponding texts. "Give Love" by Angeliki Varella is a story about a class with two new students from another country and shows how differences in the class are resolved. In the poem "Kites in the Sky" by Rena Karthaiou, students follow the flight of the kite on a spring day. The poem "The Sun and the Child" also by Rena Karthaiou describes how the sun plays with children.

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Figure 2: *The Journey of the Sun*

Students can read the texts in Greek; however, prompts are provided as they can click on an unknown word and an explanation or translation is provided in their first Language (L1). Literature, including poetry, is chosen as a means of providing a deeper level of cognitive and linguistic processing. Input is made comprehensible (Krashen, 1981) and scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978) is provided as each text is designed so that prompts (translations, definitions, parts of speech, pronunciation, etymology etc.) can be accessed by clicking on the unknown word, phrase or sentence. Students can also hear the entire text recited or listen to individual sentences.

Figure 3: *Excerpts from children's books with multicultural themes*

5.1. Activities that focus on language, meaning and use

Each text is accompanied by lessons, exercises and activities. These lessons are designed according to Cummins' Framework for the Development of Academic Expertise (2000) which focuses on language, meaning and use.

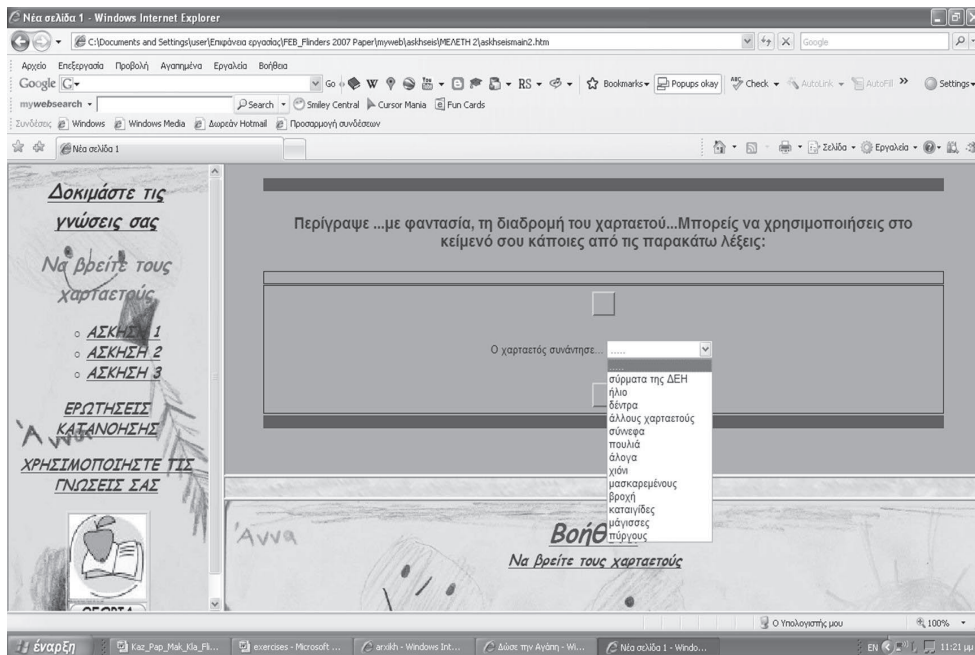
5.1.1. Focus on language

According to Cummins (2000:273–280) the focus on language (FL) component puts grammar and the role of phonics in reading instruction under the umbrella of language awareness. Language awareness is not limited to formal aspects of the language but also includes the development of critical language awareness (Cummins, 2000:273–280). FL must be linked to extensive input in the target language (e.g. through reading) and extensive opportunities for written and oral use of the language (Cummins, 2000:273–280). The students read the literary text, using the language prompts (i.e. they can click on unknown words to see the translation in their L1) and then complete interactive exercises on language. Students are asked to participate in activities such as filling in the blanks with the correct verbs (see figure 4). Language features such as grammar and syntax are explained and can be accessed as needed. Other exercises are more creative in nature as students are asked to imagine the journey of the kite and to describe it. They are given vocabulary that they can use as the kite visits other places and things: clouds, birds, horses, snow, etc. (see figure 5).

Figure 4: Exercises that focus on language

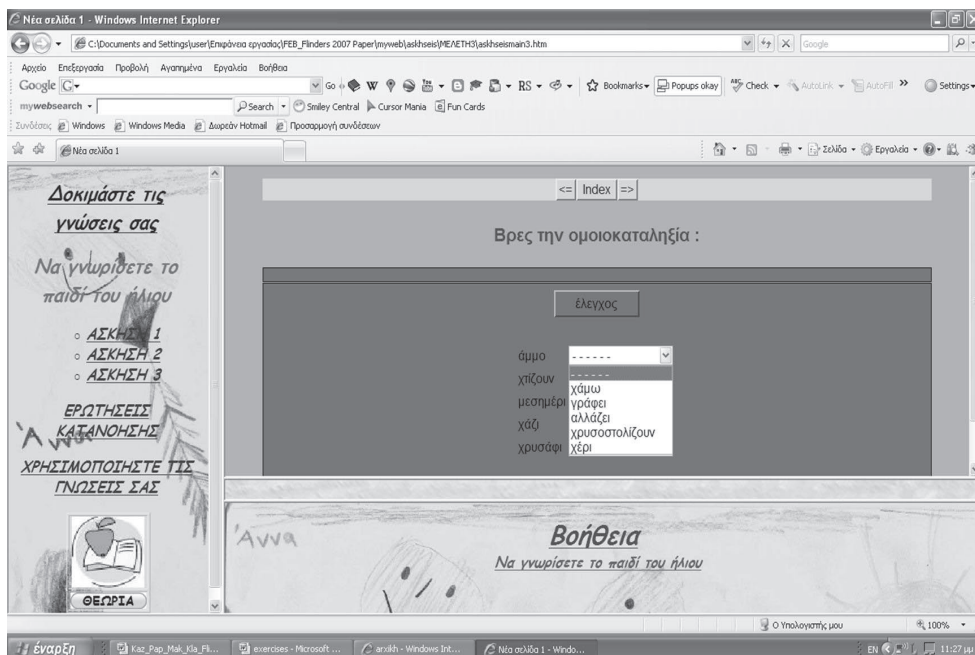
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Figure 5: Following the journey of the sun



They are asked to find rhyming words, which prepares them for the task of writing their own poem (see figure 6).

Figure 6: Rhymes



5.1.2. Focus on meaning

Focus on meaning (FM) involves two levels of comprehension: a) making input comprehensible; and b) developing critical literacy (Cummins, 2000). According to Cummins (2000), the construct of comprehensible input must go beyond literal comprehension, as depth of understanding of concepts and vocabulary as well as critical literacy are intrinsic to the notion of comprehensible input in the development of academic language proficiency. Students must, therefore, be encouraged to relate textual and instructional meanings to their own experience and prior knowledge (i.e. activate their cognitive schemata), critically analyse the information in the text (e.g. evaluate the validity of various arguments or propositions) and use the results of their discussions and analyses in some concrete, intrinsically-motivating activity or project (e.g. making a video or writing a poem or essay on a particular topic) (Cummins, 2000). In other words, literal, surface-level comprehension must shift to a deeper level of cognitive and linguistic processing (Cummins, 2000).

The interpretation of the construct of comprehensible input goes beyond literal comprehension as the FM exercises are designed to emphasise two modes: literal comprehension initially, then critical analysis of texts as well as identity involvement. In “The Journey of the Sun” students are encouraged to interpret the literature critically and creatively and to relate it to their own experiences. The students in this manner relate textual and instructional meanings to their own experience and prior knowledge which can make learning intrinsically motivating. Creative language learning and imagination are stressed (Egan, 1992). In many of the questions dealing with the meaning, the students are asked to relate the content of the texts to their own experiences. After reading “The Class of Love” they are asked: How do the two new students in the class, Giannous and Donatella, feel? What words in the text help describe how they feel? If you were in their position how would you feel? What does the teacher say when introducing the new students? What would you say to the class?

5.1.3. Focus on use

The focus on use (FU) component is used to stress that second Language (L2) acquisition will remain abstract and classroom-bound unless students have the opportunity to express themselves (i.e. their identities and their intelligence) through the target language (Cummins, 2000).

Using the literary text as stimulus, students can express their identities while using the target language. As in the sections above, the activities are based according to two modes. In the first mode the students participate in guided writing activities pertaining to the subject of the specific literary text. Guided writing or scaffolded instruction can help learners make a smooth transition to independent writing and competence (Oczkus, 2007). In the second mode, the students are encouraged to use what they

have learned in the first two foci (FL, FM) (Cummins, 2000) to write their own literary texts. The literary text given in the specific lesson is used as stimulus for language use. For example, they are asked to use grammar that they have learned in the FL set of exercises on giving commands, to give their own commands to the wind after reading the poem about the kite. They are asked to act out the flight of the kite with their classmates (with the help of the teacher) and imagine they are flying over different countries. Each child describes what he/she sees. They are asked then to construct a kite and are given web pages as links that describe how to make a kite. Then they are asked to write wishes on the kite, which will spread them as it flies overhead. They are asked to use their prior knowledge and write about their own experiences: "When do you fly kites in your country?". They are asked to write their own story using the heroes in the poems or texts or to write a poem in their L1. With the help of the teacher (and the class) they can read it to the class and translate it.

The literary texts that are written can be published on the moodle hosting the "Journey of the Sun". This creates further incentive as creative writing acquires a purpose when it acquires an audience. The literary texts, produced and published, can be multimodal (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000) or in text form. Furthermore, sister class links are provided and teachers are encouraged to find partners in learning, in Greece or other countries. This provides an authentic audience, two-way communication and the opportunity to engage in collaborative critical inquiry (Cummins, Brown, and Sayers, 2007). Sister classes can provide effective ways of learning a second language and motivation as applications can go beyond traditional pedagogical orientations and students can actively engage in the use of language (Kourtis-Kazoullis and Cummins, 2005; Skourtou, 2002).

6. Conclusion

"The Journey of the Sun" is an attempt to provide language learning support for immigrant and repatriate students in primary education. It is based on the appreciation of literature but goes beyond simple admiration in an attempt to transfer this "imaginary energy from literature to the student" (Frye, 1964:77 in McKay, 1987:193). A few lessons or a few hours using the Internet are not enough to help the student who is trying to master a new language reach the appropriate level of academic proficiency; however, it can help him/her in the first stages of learning by assisting in the comprehension and production of "academic" or school-based texts. More importantly, it can inspire students to continue reading and continue writing. Perhaps some will become poets or writers — others not. The goal is for them to enjoy reading literature, which can help them in the long run to improve their academic language proficiency.

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Ένταξη παιδιών παλλινοστούντων και αλλοδαπών στο ελληνικό σχολείο για την Α/θμια Εκπαίδευση, 2008

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