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Using qualitative methods for the analysis of adult immigrants' L2 needs: findings from a research project in Greece focusing on school-parents communication.

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Abstract

In the Greek context of economic crisis and of emerging xenophobic ideas and discourse, this article presents some findings from a research project which had the ambition to give voice to immigrants in Greece about their own language and communication needs. The target group of the project were immigrant parents, whose children attend public schools in the area of Volos. Communication between schools and immigrant families is fragmentary or non-existent, causing frustration for parents and teachers. The ELMEGO project used focus groups in order to construct social meaning related to migrant discourse, and shed light on it from an interdisciplinary perspective, combining insights from social anthropology, applied linguistics and the sociology of education. After the first stage of needs analysis, the practical outcomes of the project were the design of teaching material and educational activities, the implementation of pilot courses and their evaluation, and the creation of a resource pack. The results of the project question the validity of specific-purposes-approaches to language needs, stress the importance of conditions for learning the migrants' second language, and associate social, cultural and institutional settings with identity and emotional choices.

Keywords: migration; identity; Greece; Second Language Learning; Language Needs; literacy; parental involvement with schools

1. Introduction

This paper presents the research objectives, some methodology issues and tentative results of a research project undertaken by an interdisciplinary group of researchers in Volos, Greece, including sociolinguists, social anthropologists, sociologists of education and language teaching specialists.¹

¹ This research was supported by a grant from the Research Committee of the University of Thessaly. The grant was awarded after a Call and a selection process for projects for targeted research aiming at actions linked to social issues. George Androulakis was the Scientific Coordinator of the ELMEGO project, and this paper mainly reports findings from the first stage of the project, conducted by Efi Mastorodimou, Olga Sevastidou and Alexandra Siotou, under the supervision of Riki Van Boeschoten.

In the Greek context, where a coherent education policy for Greek as a second language (L2) has been slow to develop, this research project is one of the very first systematically and scientifically organised attempts to aim at designing and implementing specialized second language materials and courses for immigrants, which are based on an analysis of the needs of the target group as well as on the aims and syllabus which will respond to these needs. The final stage of this two-year-long project will be the delivery of specialized Greek language courses, which will help immigrant parents to acquire the necessary skills for effective communication with the schools of their children.

The research team made the deliberate choice of using an ethnographic approach² and qualitative methods, instead of employing a questionnaire and quantitative data sets. This choice was dictated by the desire to understand the needs of immigrant parents through their own perspectives, combined with a thorough knowledge of the specific contexts within which their views developed. Therefore, over a period of nine months (October 2010 to June 2011) we observed everyday situations in their children's schools and at immigrants' homes, we organised focus groups with immigrant parents and teachers and we conducted individual interviews with immigrant parents.

We argue in this paper that the choice of qualitative methods in order to conduct needs analysis has an immediate effect on the types of needs revealed. In fact, the project in Volos shows that social and psychological needs should be added to mere language and communicative needs and taken into account for curriculum and syllabus design purposes. Indeed, our initial assumptions, based mainly on quantitative studies, posited that there is a serious lack of communication between immigrant parents and their children's schools and that this gap is mainly due to a lack of language skills. Our qualitative research findings, however, showed a much more complex picture, where teachers and immigrant parents had different ideas about the aims of parent/school interaction and where language was only one, but not the most important, among various factors hampering mutual intercultural understanding.

² Cf. Dell Hymes: *Ethnography, linguistics, narrative inequality: Toward an understanding of voice*. London: Taylor & Francis, 1996; Monica Heller: *Linguistic minorities and modernity: a sociolinguistic ethnography*. London-New York: Continuum, 2006; Sheena Gardner & Marilyn Martin-Jones (eds.): *Multilingualism, discourse and ethnography*. New York-Oxford: Routledge, 2012.

2. Needs analysis: the applied linguistics point of view

Needs analysis (NA) is nowadays recognised, in applied linguistics literature,³ as playing a crucial part in the process of language teaching and learning. In fact, individual and social NA is considered as providing validity and relevance to all course design and implementation actions.

In a pioneer book in 1978, Munby⁴ introduced his strongly criticized but influential model which consists of two stages: (a) the “Communication Needs Processor” (CNP), set out under eight variables that affect communication needs and have dynamic relationships with each other, and (b) the interpretation of the profile of needs derived from the CNP in terms of micro-skills and micro-functions. Several other models followed, with their focus on the learner’s situation (target situation analysis), on the learner’s needs in combination with the teaching context (pedagogic needs analysis) or on the specific language and communication goals pursued (register, discourse or genre analysis to needs assessment).

The distinction underlying most of these models is the one between “objective” and “subjective” needs, established by Nunan.⁵ Thus, “objective” needs take into account biographical data, such as age, nationality, social profile, first language, literacy in other languages, etc., whereas “subjective” needs are based on information reflecting the perceptions, attitudes, expectations and priorities of the learner and may include information on the reasons why a learner undertakes to learn a second language, or on the classroom tasks the learner prefers.

³ We refer to the following important works: René Richterich & Jean-Louis Chancerel: *Identifying the Needs of Adults Learning a Foreign Language*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1980; Richard Berwick: Needs assessment in language programming: from theory to practice. In: Robert Keith Johnson (ed). *The second language curriculum*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 48-62; Geoffrey Brindley: The role of needs analysis in adult ESL program design. In: Johnson (ed.): *The second language curriculum*, p. 63-78; Elaine Tarone and George Yule: *Focus on the Language Learner*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989; Richard West: Needs analysis in language teaching. In: *Language Teaching* 27/1 (1994), p. 1-19; R. R. Jordan: *English for academic purposes: A guide and resource book for teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997; Liz Hamp-Lyons: ‘English for academic purposes’. In: Ronald Carter & David Nunan (eds.): *The Cambridge guide to teaching English to speakers of other languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 126-130; Denise Finney: ‘The ELT curriculum: A flexible model for a changing world’. In: Jack C. Richards & Willy A. Renandya (eds.): *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 69-79; Michael Long (ed.): *Second Language Needs Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

⁴ John Munby: *Communicative Syllabus Design*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.

⁵ David Nunan: *Syllabus design*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 18.

NA is indisputably a complex process. In their early but significant works, Richterich and Chancerel point out that in general the learner is little aware of his/her needs and, in particular, he/she is unable to express them except in very vague terms.⁶ Porcher stresses that “speaking of a need is not the same as speaking in general of what is lacking.”⁷ A need does not exist prior to a project: it is always constructed.” Furthermore, we are increasingly aware today that NA should not just be considered as a first stage for the design of language courses, but rather as an “on-going process”.⁸

In an attempt to summarize the components of a NA for designing a language learning programme, and extending the still useful list that Dudley-Evans and St. John⁹ proposed, we may include the following:

- Context situation, in which the course will be run
- Personal information about learners
- Language information about learners
- Professional, cultural and social information about learners
- Learner’s deficiencies and strengths
- Language learning needs formulated by the learners
- Language learning needs formulated by the second language community
- Learner’s needs from the course
- Language and communication patterns used in the target situation
- Content analysis of documents used in the target situation.

In any case, a strategy about the NA in a given community and situation has to tackle some fundamental questions:

- Who will conduct the study?
- What kind of information is to be collected?
- How will the information be collected?
- How will the findings be interpreted?

Techniques and tools used in NA may vary considerably, from consultation with persons in key positions and *in situ* discussions to tests, scales and statistical analyses, from direct

⁶ Richterich & Chancerel, *Identifying the needs of adults*, p. 3.

⁷ Louis Porcher: *Reflections on language needs in the school*. Strasbourg: Council for Cultural Co-operation of the Council of Europe, 1980, p. 29.

⁸ Ronald V. White: *The ELT Curriculum*. Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1998: 83-91, p. 91.

⁹ Tony Dudley-Evans & Maggie Jo St. John: *Developments in ESP: A multi-disciplinary approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 25.

observation to records and report studies, from review of relevant literature and of case studies to questionnaires, interviews or focus groups.

After all, most researches on language NA were not systematic and multifactorial, global and interdisciplinary, and thus it seems that mere intuition is still central in taking decisions about language course design. According to Long:¹⁰ “There is an urgent need for a serious research program (as distinct from one-off studies) focused on methodological options in NA itself.”

3. The setup of the Volos research: methodological aspects

Needs analysis was just the first stage of the ELMEGO project for which the main aim and object was the delivery of specialized courses of Greek, in order to allow immigrant parents to develop the necessary skills for an effective communication with the schools attended by their children, and, more generally, to facilitate the integration of immigrants in the Greek society.

Additional objectives of the project were: a) raising awareness of educational institutions and their personnel (school directors, educators) towards enhancing multilingualism and multiculturalism; b) contribution to the improvement of the relations of parents (immigrants and others) with the school; c) promotion of co-ordination and collaboration between school, academic community, local authorities, and immigrant organisations.

Needs analysis was followed by the development of a specialized syllabus, the design of teaching material in printed form and multimedia, and the planning of educational activities. Pilot courses were implemented (4 classes of 13 persons) and led to the creation of a resource pack comprising multimedia evidence of the organisation, application and evaluation of the courses.

As mentioned above, an important methodological choice of the project was to give priority to qualitative research methods, in order to obtain better insights both into the social and cultural contexts in which immigrant parents' linguistic needs arise and into the more “subjective” aspects of those needs according to Nunan's¹¹ definition. The NA research was carried out in two distinct phases: during the first preliminary phase we adopted an open-ended research agenda to explore the views and needs of immigrants and teachers, and in the second phase we worked in a more targeted way with focus groups.

¹⁰ Long, *Second Language Needs Analysis*, p. 5.

¹¹ Nunan, *Syllabus design*, p. 21.

The sample of immigrants who have participated in focus groups or in interviews conducted for the project is constituted of twenty-six persons. Twenty-three of them, thirteen men and ten women, come from Albania. There is one couple from Romania and one woman from Bulgaria. The majority of the participants came to Greece in the 90's and just seven of them came after the year 2000. Most of the Albanian men work in the construction sector, one of them in timber craftwork, another one as a street cleaner and two of them are unemployed. All of the Albanian women work as housekeepers except three of them who are busy with their own domestic duties. The Romanian man works in a bakery, his wife is unemployed and the woman from Bulgaria is a jobseeker. They are all parents with children in the Greek education system. The majority of participants' children go to primary school, fewer to high school, two to the kindergarten and some of them are in higher education. All of the participants have completed compulsory education in their country of origin and about ten of them continued with their studies at tertiary level.

3.1. Preliminary fieldwork

During the first phase of the research, which lasted four months, we applied anthropological fieldwork methods, including participant observation of parents/teachers interaction, of social gatherings organised by schools and migrant organisations, and of immigrant parents' everyday life events.¹² We recorded our findings in fieldnotes and diaries, which we shared among ourselves, and we discussed our findings and preliminary interpretations on a regular basis. Our main aims in this phase were twofold:

- a) to locate a sufficient number of immigrant parents with children attending public schools of compulsory education in the area of Volos, who were willing to cooperate with our project, as well as a corresponding number of schoolteachers.
- b) to obtain a preliminary understanding of immigrant parents' language and communication needs, by speaking to both parents and teachers.

The ultimate aim of this first phase was to form a sufficient number of focus groups with which we planned to work in the second phase.

¹² See table 1, below.

Table 1: Fieldwork overview

Research phase	Research Technique	Data collection equipment	Setting	Sample
1 st phase	Participant observation in 10 situations	Diaries, fieldnotes	5 schools, 3 immigrants associations, 2 parents associations	53 immigrants of several origins, 21 teachers
2 nd phase	Focus groups, group and individual interviews in 9 situations	Video and tape-recordings	4 schools, 3 immigrants centers, 2 homes,	26 immigrants (23 from Albania, 2 from Romania, 1 from Bulgaria), 16 teachers

In order to approach immigrant parents, we adopted two different and complementary methods: the first focused on more or less formal initial contacts with specific schools of interest to our research, and the second on immigrants' informal, everyday networks. As part of the first approach, we used official data to construct a preliminary sample of twenty schools which seemed appropriate for further fieldwork. As it proved more difficult than foreseen to obtain access to these schools through officially approved channels, we eventually trimmed down our initial sample to twelve schools, for which we could also rely on through earlier contacts of the research team with school directors and teachers.

In our second approach, alternative and more informal forms of networking with immigrant parents were adopted: researchers' personal contacts developed during previous research projects, and migrant networks, such as mother tongue classes for second generation immigrants set up by the Albanian immigrant community. The contacts developed through these networks have played an essential role in the project, as they brought out important and rich ethnographic material which could not easily be elicited from short visits to schools.

During this four-month intensive fieldwork, the immigrants' views on a wide range of subjects, including their migration projects and their expectations, their attitudes towards the Greek schooling system, their own language learning practices and their needs in terms of communication were explored, through open-ended interviews and informal conversations. The hierarchy of these needs was quite different from the initial assumptions based on the

literature: immigrant parents gave top priority to language skills related to work, whereas communication with the school was relegated right to the bottom; the middle ground was covered by language skills related to official paper work, medical terminology and skills required to pass an official language test in order to obtain a permanent residence permit.

3.2. Focus groups

In order to tease out the validity of these preliminary findings, we initially planned to set up twelve small focus groups: eight groups with parents (two for parents with children in kindergartens, five for the primary school and one for secondary school), and four groups with teachers (one for kindergarten teachers, two for primary school teachers and one for high school teachers). In organising the focus groups our main concern was to fully exploit the ethnographic data collected during fieldwork in order to cover the widest possible range of cases in terms of ethnicity, gender and language skills. However, for reasons we explain below, we eventually carried out a smaller number of focus group discussions and also used some alternative strategies.

Focus groups have been used in social sciences as a potentially powerful “methodological tool to raise quality data and information, through a process of direct interaction between participants in the group for a specific and clearly identified thema-research object.”¹³ The central feature of this method is that it is based on the dynamics of communication, language and thought, as they arise by the dynamics of each group’s composition. A second interesting feature is that it allows the researcher to observe “the construction of meaning in actual practice”.¹⁴ The interactions among participants reveal their personal needs about language and communication issues and their spontaneous reactions offer additional detail. Basch notes that “focus groups are a qualitative method which generates data concerning feelings and opinions of a small group of people on a given topic or phenomenon.”¹⁵

Yet when the time came to put the method in practice, we experienced a setback, because a large percentage of participants, both immigrant parents and teachers, who had initially agreed to take part in the focus groups, eventually refused to participate or simply did not

¹³ Theodoros Iossifidis: *Qualitative research methods in social sciences*. Athens: Kritiki, p. 134 [in Greek].

¹⁴ Sue Wilkinson: Focus group methodology: A review. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 1 (2004), p. 181-203, p. 182.

¹⁵ Charles Basch: Focus group interview: an underutilized research technique for improving theory and practice in health education. In: *Health Education Q.* 14 (1987), p. 411-448, p. 414.

show up at the set time of the meeting. Then we had either to postpone the meeting or to proceed with a smaller number of participants than we had initially estimated. In some cases the number of participants was less than three, creating concern about whether the meeting could still be considered as a focus group or as group interview. Suffice to say, this is a quite common problem for social scientists who have decided to adopt this method.¹⁶ Nevertheless, we decided to use additional in-depth interviews with single individuals or small groups of two or three immigrant parents, in order to fill up the gaps left by the failure to carry out all focus groups according to schedule.

Eventually, we managed to carry out four focus groups with teachers, three with immigrant parents, two group interviews and three individual interviews with immigrant parents. We intended to realize two meetings with each group, but this was not always possible. In the first meeting with immigrant parents we offered a broad range of topics, including among others their own perception of their linguistic needs, the way in which they learned Greek, their expectations concerning the future of their children, their involvement in their children's homework, their experience with teachers and their participation in the school's parents association. In addition we asked them which additional topics they would like to discuss. In the second meeting we focused in particular on specific communication situations and brought in textual and visual materials to trigger discussion. We also experimented with a role game process, in which participants had to imagine themselves in the role of the parent, the teacher or the school director and respond to prompts accordingly.

Two specific points of our methodology need to be stressed here. As the general philosophy of our approach aimed at contributing to the empowerment of immigrant parents with limited communicative competence, we tried to focus on the positive aspects of the participants' experience in relation to the Greek language and communication with the school. In other words, we tried to emphasize success rather than failure. In the second instance, we tried to encourage a sense of collectivity, extending beyond the level of their personal experiences, a point to which we will return in our conclusions.

In the focus groups with teachers we concentrated on issues concerning the extent to which they feel that the existing school system is prepared to deal with the presence of immigrant

¹⁶ Cf. Judith K. Bernhard, Marie Louise Lefebvre, Kenise Murphy Kilbride, Gyda Chud, and Rika Lange: *Troubled Relationships in Early Childhood Education: Parent-Teacher Interactions in Ethnoculturally Diverse Child Care Settings*. In: *Early Education & Development* 9/1 (1988), p. 5-28, p. 12; Styliani Konstantinou: *Immigrant Mothers, their Children and Greek Public School*. Unpublished Postgraduate Paper (Thessaloniki): Department of Primary Education of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 2009, p. 19 [in Greek].

pupils, their own experiences of interaction with immigrant parents, and the changes they considered as necessary to improve relations.

3.3. Fieldwork and focus groups: supplementary methods

We strongly believe that fieldwork and focus groups were an apposite combination of methods. The two methodological tools brought out details or aspects which would stay in obscurity without this “cooperation”. Whereas usually focus groups are formed more or less by chance,¹⁷ our intensive preliminary fieldwork enabled us to choose participants who could relate to each other more easily. It also allowed us to elaborate on topics which we knew were relevant to their own life experiences and thus could encourage a lively participation in the discussion. Moreover, it was through our fieldwork experience that we became more aware of gender issues, and thus decided to set up some single sex focus groups for immigrant parents, in order to encourage women to express their views more openly. In the case of the focus groups of teachers, fieldwork enabled us to set up groups belonging to the same school community, but with participants whom we knew to have conflicting views on migration issues. Finally, in the second phase of our research, we used our prior knowledge to carry out interviews with individuals who, because of their limited language skills, could not be easily convinced to participate in a group discussion. Such was the case of women who spent most of their time with their children at home and/or whose husbands did not allow their participation in activities outside the home.¹⁸

4. Preliminary research findings

The combination of these two research tools has led to important insights both on the development of linguistic attitudes and on the communication of immigrant parents with the school. Some of our major findings are as follows:

- The lack of communication between immigrant parents and teachers is only partially related to language issues. Equally important is the lack of intercultural understanding

¹⁷ David L. Morgan: *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*. U.S.A.: SAGE Publications, 1997, p. 43.

¹⁸ For the relation between language skills and gender, see below, in (4).

and the ethnocentric and xenophobic attitudes we recorded among native Greek teachers, pupils and parents.

- The need felt by immigrant parents to communicate with the school is more important than our preliminary findings made us believe. This is so because most immigrant parents feel they have failed in their migration projects and they have put all their stakes on their children's future and their success at school. Yet the aims of this communication are conceptualized differently by immigrant parents and teachers. Whereas teachers think their interaction with the parents should concern primarily the learning process, immigrant parents attribute equal importance to their children's "proper behaviour", an indication of the increasingly strained relations within the migrant family confronted with different cultural attitudes.
- There is an important gendered aspect to the development of language skills. While men mainly learn the language at work and usually have a restricted vocabulary at their disposal, women usually learn Greek by watching television or by helping their children with their homework.
- It is difficult to reach and involve immigrant parents who most need to develop their language skills. Women who do not go out to work, who are less socialized or who live under the strict control of their husbands are entangled in a world of isolation, from which escape seems quite difficult. Significantly, women who were most eager to participate in the focus groups were those who had already escaped from the strict bonds of patriarchal family relations (divorced or widowed). On the other hand, men who learned a basic vocabulary at their work site, felt they did not need to learn more and experience the prospect of returning to the classroom as an affront to their sense of masculinity.

Concluding the first part of our paper, we would like to stress that the greatest challenge of our project was to instill in the participants a collective identity. As briefly mentioned before, the focus groups' basic objective was to promote group interaction and discussion. The reinforcement, though, of their collective identity was a basic requirement to run the group beyond the individual empirical experiences of each participant. Personal experiences were the raw material with which we aimed to build our hypotheses, but at the same time we intended to highlight the diversity of these experiences, in terms of ethnicity, age, gender,

occupation and education, in order to facilitate the team of educationalists to develop the best possible teaching material.

We were mostly interested in helping the participants to understand that by drawing on their personal experiences they somehow represent the rest of their migrant communities.

Therefore, we tried to make them understand the research process not as an opportunity that would bring them personal benefit, but as a process important for the development of communication channels between immigrant parents and the school structure at large.

In particular, this form of research project helped us to better understand the multiple factors that influence the linguistic behaviour of immigrant parents and their communication with the school. Perhaps most importantly, we became more aware of the fact that many of these factors are not purely linguistic, but social, cultural and political.

5. Specific factors that influence the linguistic needs of immigrant parents

5.1. Techniques of learning Greek

Most of our participants learned Greek through direct contact and first-hand experience with the economic, social and cultural reality of the host country: in the workplace, by shopping in the supermarket, watching TV at home, socializing in the neighbourhood, asking for information from social services, preparing their children for school, in short in various communicative situations which required interaction with members of the Greek speech community. In essence, they learned the language *in situ*.

The data revealed, however, important gender-specific variations regarding the development of language skills and the learning methods immigrants adopt. For male immigrants it seems that the work place constituted the only way - or maybe even the only “acceptable” way – of learning the Greek language and that this process was mainly aimed at acquiring a specific vocabulary. This vocabulary, on the one hand, is related to the typical everyday communication needs among male work mates and, on the other, to specific work jargon (tools, skills, tasks, etc). Therefore, most men are unfamiliar with different kinds of vocabulary (e.g. medical and legal terminology) beyond their specific work experience. It is characteristic, furthermore, that in male narratives, learning the Greek language is presented as an “all-in-one” process instead of a gradual and accumulative process of acquisition.

In contrast, female immigrants mentioned various techniques of learning Greek, which correspond to different periods in their lives as immigrants. The majority of Albanian women participants came to Greece in the context of family reunification. They followed their husbands who had already been in Greece for some years, had a better knowledge of Greek and were, consequently, their first tutors of Greek.

During their first years in Greece, most women immigrants reported that they did not work, but stayed at home to take care of the household. It might be suggested that their home isolation would delay the process of learning Greek, since it automatically limits the opportunities of developing linguistic skills in interaction with others. However, according to the women's narratives, staying at home offered them an alternative technique of learning the language: watching television.

After this initial period, most of our female informants mentioned that they *did* seek employment. Depending upon the type and nature of their employment, at their workplace women had the opportunity to improve their knowledge of Greek. In women's narratives, this process constitutes the second, and in many cases, the last stage of learning Greek. Most Albanian women participants in our sample worked as domestic workers, which means that they mainly had contact with Greek employers, that they did not work with others and they gained access to a language register mostly restricted to the private sphere of domesticity. In contrast, women immigrants who worked in public places, such as coffee shops and restaurants, were more motivated to develop both their oral and written Greek. Some women reported social networks as the exclusive means of learning a language. Specifically, they stated that they learned Greek with the assistance of Greek women, who either lived in the same neighbourhood, or were acquaintances of their spouses in the context of work with whom they became friends or related through baptism or marriage. In some women's accounts, there is a third and final stage in the process of learning Greek. By helping their children with their homework they learned how to speak and, primarily, how to write Greek along with their offspring.¹⁹ In contrast, it appeared that male immigrants, who were not involved in helping their children with their homework, found it more difficult to learn to read and write in Greek. Interestingly, most male participants mentioned that they write Greek using the Latin instead of the Greek alphabet. In fact, male immigrants readily

¹⁹ For the role of migrant children as language mediators to their parents, see Pilar Durán: Children as Mediators for the Second Language Learning of their Migrant Parents. In: *Language & Education: An International Journal* 17/5 (2003), p. 311-331.

recognized that because of their active involvement with their children's homework their wives had learned Greek more quickly and more efficiently, even though they had lived for a shorter period in the host country.

In this case, we are confronted with a paradox. The fact that female immigrants stay at home, which they consider as a primary challenge in learning the language, not only offers alternative learning methods, such as watching television, but also contributes to the acquisition of a higher level of language skills (writing and reading) through their involvement with the children's education. Another aspect of this paradox is the fact that the dominant roles of intergenerational relations are reversed. Children become their parents' teachers; they are the ones transmitting knowledge, correcting their parents' mistakes. This role reversal affects, to a significant degree, the relationships within the family and may enhance feelings of inferiority in parents with low Greek language skills.

5.2. Greek: the stereotype of a difficult language to learn

One of the factors that affect immigrants' effort to develop their language skills is their perception of the Greek language. Most participants consider Greek as a difficult language. They reach such conclusions by comparing Greek to Albanian or Italian. Among the most frequently mentioned difficulties faced by immigrant parents are the Greek alphabet, and the presence of different sounds which do not exist in their own languages and are therefore hard to pronounce.

What is perhaps most striking in these comments is the emphasis on the "physicality" of the language and on the sensorial qualities of communication (the visual, the oral and the aural). On the other hand, one of the most common mistakes made by Albanian-speaking persons, which is confusing the gender of personal pronouns,²⁰ was never mentioned. This contradiction can be partly explained by the colloquial and informal ways in which most immigrants have learned to speak and understand Greek. Yet, taking into account the relative ease with which many immigrants, especially Albanians, obtain competence in spoken Greek, it seems that the degree of difficulty is overemphasized, creating a misperception of the

²⁰ Cf. Anna Anastassiadi-Symeonidi, Eleni Vletsis, Maria Mitsiaki, Vassilis Bozonelos, Valentina Houma: The Linguistic Errors of Learners of Greek as a Second Language and their Role in Multicultural Secondary Classes. In: A.-N. Simeonidou-Christidou (ed.), *Proceedings of Conference "2008, European Year of Intercultural Dialogue: Discussing with languages-cultures"*. Thessaloniki: Aristotle University, p. 597-612 [in Greek].

language which does not correspond to reality. Maintaining this stereotype about the degree of difficulty immigrant participants seem to have accepted the fact that they will never be able to avoid making mistakes when using Greek, particularly when it comes to spelling. According to our observation this phenomenon, in certain cases, deters immigrants from further learning Greek. On the other hand, overcoming the perceived difficulties may also be a reason for pride. One man of Albanian background, for example, mentioned that when he had first come to Greece he considered it impossible to learn Greek precisely because of its difficulty. Today, however, the fact that – against all odds - he has learned to speak Greek is presented in his story as a major achievement, which completes his success story as part of his migration narrative.

A final factor which makes Greek appear as a difficult language and thus affects immigrants' learning process is the pace at which they are forced to learn the language within the constraints of migrant life. The necessity to adopt speedy methods of learning Greek leads to the perception of the process as being arduous and of the Greek language itself as being difficult. This in turn may deter immigrants from further learning Greek.

5.3. Literacy

Although all our participants have improved their linguistic skills with the passage of time as far as their command of spoken Greek is concerned, only a minority have managed to improve their writing skills in Greek. The development of literacy skills significantly depends upon the social context in which immigrants will find themselves, and more specifically, the social, economic and employment situations of their life.²¹ These factors, in turn, determine the value given to written language by our immigrant subjects. The fact that most male immigrants work in construction renders writing an unnecessary luxury, since they perform exclusively manual tasks. In contrast, learning to write Greek becomes important in the context of upward social mobility (for example upgrading from the position of dishwasher to that of a waitress or from the position of a construction worker to that of a contractor).

²¹ Cf. Heide Spruck Wrigley, Jing Chen, Sheida White, Jaleh Soroui: Assessing the literacy skills of adult immigrants and adult English language learners. In: *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* [Special Issue: Bringing Community to the Adult ESL Classroom] 121 (2009), p. 5–24.

More specifically, our research showed that the circumstances during which an immigrant needs to use his/her writing skills are limited in scope, but of vital importance. The need arises usually in economic transactions and in dealings with social and legal services, when they have to fill in written applications for residency, employment and social security certifications and other bureaucratic issues. Informants mentioned that in such cases they either use the Latin alphabet or write all that is needed in capital letters, or they ask their employees or their own offspring for assistance. They may also resort to accountants or solicitors who provide such services after charging a fee.

The formal language of the state bureaucracy, which characterizes all written applications and reflects the rigidity of the whole process stands in stark contrast to the informal language used in daily life, by immigrants and locals alike, but underscores the immigrants' inadequacy in linguistic skills needed to negotiate their position in Greek society.

While the need for writing skills is restricted to such dealings with official instances, the ability to read the Greek alphabet, visually different from the Latin and Cyrillic alphabet used in the home countries of most of our informants, is an essential need in the immigrants' daily life. Not being able to read Greek letters on billboards, signs, magazine and newspaper titles, flyers, advertisements, bills, legal documents, subtitles on television, and brands stresses their linguistic difference and lack of familiarity with the social reality of the host country, in a very visual way.²²

The inability to read Greek constitutes a stigma in a world that is dominated by written texts: it excludes those who do not possess the knowledge - and therefore the social capital - to understand those written words, making it more difficult for them to get around in town and increasing their dependence on family members who do.

5.4. Feelings

Taking into consideration the emotions and sense of nostalgia which emerged when participants talked about the fact that they have forgotten the foreign languages they had been taught in the past, due to the lack of practice, it is revealed that knowing and "owning" a foreign language constitutes cognitive and social capital for them.

²² Many of our participants mentioned that not knowing the Greek alphabet they sought to find the same text in Latin characters, in order to understand the meaning of the Greek word.

When referring to difficulties they encountered in the host country upon arrival, specifically with regards to language, immigrants portray the emotional states they experienced in various communicative contexts.

The feelings expressed by participants pinpoint and confirm the findings of Worthy²³ regarding the attitudes of Latino immigrant parents in the USA who felt inadequate and disabled by not knowing English (in their words: “It’s just like missing an arm, like swimming with only one hand”). Perhaps the fact that they gesticulate in order to communicate contributes to the feeling of being deprived of a basic human function which is speech. The emotions described by our participants give further validity to the fact that knowledge of a language constitutes a social capital which endows the individual with social value. In turn, not possessing such social capital creates a sense of shame in the participants. The fear of being ridiculed is dominant and interconnected with a feeling of shame. Throughout the analysis of participants’ responses we realized that, initially, shame constitutes an obstacle when learning the language. Furthermore, we observed that the shame that originates in not knowing Greek is a factor which hinders further socialization on the part of participants.

With the passing of time, all these negative feelings wane when immigrants gain further knowledge of Greek. In contrast to their first years in Greece, they don’t face the same linguistic and communicative problems. Consequently, language knowledge can take second place to other priorities. For what reason and in which cases do immigrants desire or are forced to improve the level of knowledge of Greek and need to renegotiate their priorities?

6. Immigrants’ needs and priorities: language knowledge, status and identity

The economic and social situation of immigrants significantly determines their priorities. Drawing from our research data, it is clear that for our immigrant subjects improving the level of knowledge of Greek was directly connected to the issue of improving both social status and their living conditions in Greece. A crucial factor in this context appeared to be the question of multiple identities - both self-ascribed identities and those maintained and reproduced by others. In order to be accepted by the host society, immigrants feel they must dispel those elements which denote their ethnic, migrant identity. By improving their Greek

²³ Jo Worthy: Como si le Falta un Brazo: Latino Immigrant Parents and the Costs of Not Knowing English, In: *Journal of Latinos and Education* 5/2 (2006), p. 139–154, p. 140.

they will be able to move unobserved in various domains of the host society, since they will have covered the traces of difference and they will have avoided hostility exercised by the host society towards foreigners. They will achieve this by, in essence, camouflaging, their identity and reconstructing a new perception of themselves when interacting with others. Aside from this we observed that, for immigrants, the status that one can acquire by knowing the language well is a motivation for improving knowledge of Greek.

Therefore, we realized that for immigrants improving their skills in Greek constitutes a practice through which social agents can restore and reclaim their status by demonstrating their language skills in public. Lack of knowledge of the Greek language is taken by immigrants to be a sign of inadequate education, even when they have completed their compulsory education in their home country. It becomes clear that for immigrants, in this particular social context, the level of knowledge of Greek is more important than the degree of knowledge of one's mother tongue, and generally one's particular academic knowledge. On the one hand, this is related to the fact that the immigrants' education at home is not recognized as social capital in the host country. On the other hand, we cannot overlook the fact that the techniques immigrants had used in order to learn Greek are responsible for their feelings of inadequate education. A primary issue in the way most immigrants learned Greek is that they focused on orality and overlooked the written language.

Precisely for this reason many participants considered the way in which they learned Greek wrong and unorthodox. It is no coincidence that most participants mentioned that they would like to learn grammar, syntax, reading, writing and spelling, when asked to clarify what further knowledge they would like to obtain. They wish, therefore, to acquire the type of knowledge they could not acquire when learning the language at an everyday communication level. We can infer, therefore, that the practices immigrants adopted in order to learn Greek, and their evaluation(s), play an important role in the way they understand and conceptualize the process of improving their knowledge of Greek, but also whether this is attainable.

7. Conclusion

From the data presented above, it becomes clear that by improving knowledge of Greek, immigrants hope to “make progress”, as a female participant characteristically said, renegotiating, in essence, their identity; who they are or who they want to be, in this

particular social context. In this case it becomes evident that better knowledge of Greek will facilitate them in fulfilling their goals in terms of employment, as well as with regards to their ambitions.

Excellent knowledge of Greek is seen as a necessary tool to enable them to change their employment conditions, by allowing them to redefine their identity. It is noteworthy that only one female participant clarified that for her being able to help her children in school is a motivation to improve her Greek. Immigrants who do not aspire to remain in the host country do not have the same drive to improve their knowledge of Greek, as is the case with those who want to live in Greece permanently, or at least for a long period of time. The fact that participants who clearly stated that they are interested in improving their Greek have been in Greece for at least a decade (the majority) cannot be seen as a coincidence. They are also the ones who express the desire to remain in the country and develop high language skills.

Based on qualitative methods, the immigrants' L2 learning needs analysis clearly showed that these needs are far from being merely linguistic. All in all, data and conclusions from the needs analysis stage of the ELMEGO project led the research team to the design of specific learning material and courses of Greek as L2, with emphasis on the empowerment of immigrants and on the sharing of positive, rather than implicitly xenophobic attitudes towards immigration in Greece.