LANGUAGE AND LITERACIES IN THE EARLY ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Alexia Giannakopoulou

Hellenic Open University

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to link theory and practice regarding the English for Young Learners (EYL) curriculum in the early grades of the Greek primary school, and provide a synthesis of findings from existing studies carried out mainly by teachers, who have the potential, as inside participants, to look into the educational experiences in ways that are not always apparent to those who look from the outside. The first part of the paper focuses on PEAP[1], the EYL programme for grades 1 and 2, and how it enhances language development and whole child development. The second part presents Magic Books, the textbooks for grade 3, which were developed within the context of the PEAP project to ensure continuity between the first two grades and the third one. The paper focuses on how children embark upon becoming literate in a new language and expands the area of focus from traditional literacy (the ability to read and write) to multiliteracies and more specifically social and cultural literacies.

1. Introduction

Over the past fifteen years, English language teaching in the Greek state primary school has been informed by the paradigm of a cross thematic curriculum (DEPPS), with emphasis on an empirical communicative approach to learning and a focus on foreign language literacy, multilingualism and multiculturalism. Based on DEPPS, pupils from Grade 3 to Grade 6 should acquire basic communication and literacy skills and develop a positive attitude towards languages and cultures in order to function effectively in different linguacultural environments. In 2010, with the introduction of English in the first two grades of primary school, the English curriculum, the so called PEAP, moved beyond DEPPS to consider a wider framework of literacies, aiming at the development of young children's social literacies (the ability to communicate in a respectful manner and express emotions) through English, the development of respect for the 'self' and the 'other' and of a positive attitude towards the new language as well as at the acquisition of an initial awareness of linguistic and cultural difference (Dendrinos, Kosovitsa & Zouganeli 2013).

There are many definitions of literacies in language learning pedagogy that speak of the need to bring into the classroom multiple representations of meaning, in different modalities (in line with the multimodal realities of the media) in order to enhance learning and develop the ability to understand and manage variations in

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[1] The Greek acronym for the "English for Young Learners" programme.

meaning and language use, in different social and cultural contexts (Breidbach, Elsner & Young 2011, Rosenberg 2010).

Cope and Kalantzis (2009:175), strong advocates of a broad approach to literacy that moves beyond its traditional sense (the knowledge of written language) to literacies (in the plural), emphasise that:

> "Literacy teaching is not about skills and competence; it is aimed at creating a kind of person, an active designer of meaning, with a sensibility open to differences, change and innovation. The logic of multiliteracies is one that recognises that meaning making is an active, transformative process, and pedagogy based on that recognition is more likely to open up viable life courses for a world of change and diversity."

Reflecting Cope and Kalantzis' (2009) vision of literacies, the EYL programme moves beyond a narrow, traditional view of alphabetical literacy and the monomodal formalities of written language (letter sound correspondences, words, sentences, texts), towards a more holistic pedagogy to consider the "multi" dimensions of literacies.

2. Emergent literacies and language development in the first two grades

2.1 A few words about PEAP

Since its inception, PEAP has sought to move away from a traditional and uni-directional syllabus towards a more flexible and open syllabus that promotes freedom of choice and autonomy. The syllabus, which was developed *a posteriori,* was based on the experience and the research data from the first two years of the project implementation and it was, like the 3rd grade syllabus, the product of teamwork and collaboration between academics and practitioners.

Underlying the syllabus is an eclectic approach to teaching language, incorporating methods from different approaches. More specifically, the syllabus follows a cognitivist approach, which contends that children at this age learn best *by doing* in the sense that they are actively involved in the learning process, using their senses and trying to construct knowledge and meaning. It also adopts a social constructivist approach, which contends that children learn through *interaction* with the environment, the materials, the teacher and their peers, and that they are able to gain control over their memory, attention, learning and development through the social activities they engage in (Lantolf 2007).

The PEAP teaching/learning materials are not compiled in a coursebook, since the whole idea of developing autonomy is hard to reconcile with the use of a textbook (Kubanek-German 2000). They are comprised of lessons and activities that are regarded as a pool of resources, from which teachers can choose or which they can adapt and enrich with their own. The choices are based on the teachers' real world, that of their classroom.

From a language learning point of view, PEAP is aimed at developing a pre-A1 level ability to understand and use spoken language. The aim is not so much to teach specific vocabulary and structures as it is to create optimal conditions under which the language will be learned. The PEAP materials contain stories and fairytales, play, action and music, arts and crafts, and by and large, any activity that promotes acquisition in the classroom (Cameron 2001, Nikolov 2009).

The topics are drawn from the world of young children: what they talk about with their family and friends, things they enjoy, the fairytales they hear, what they watch

on TV. The specific topics are similar to the most common thematic topics found in coursebooks for children of this age (Alexiou & Konstantakis 2009). Among these are: colours, animals, numbers, family and friends, school and the classroom, the home, toys, celebrations, sports and leisure time activities. These topics provide a natural context in which simple vocabulary and structures are introduced (Bourke 2006).

Vocabulary is presented in multisensual ways (visual, audio and haptic) and practised through repetition because good repetition skills and phonological memory skills facilitate vocabulary development (Ellis 1999). However, children do not only repeat or imitate; they perform simple and concrete tasks, such as games, storytelling or problem-solving tasks that have an element of play. Some of these games are analytic language tasks, such as Kim's game (lay out flashcards for some time, cover them and ask children to recall them). Their role is to help pupils develop their short-term memory and learn new words more easily (Alexiou 2009). This kind of knowledge is not imitated; it is actively constructed internally through various mental processes and helps add words to long-term memory.

Story telling is a vital ingredient of the programme. Nearly half of the stories in the PEAP materials were taken from well-known fairytales or inspired by classic books. A lot of children are familiar with many of these stories and therefore have the background knowledge to understand them. Children, who might be at a disadvantage because they are not familiar with the specific stories or did not have early childhood story reading experiences at home, are not excluded from the educational opportunities because storytelling creates a "shared social experience" in class (Brewster, Ellis & Girard 1992).

The interaction between teacher and children in the classroom, which follows the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) sequence (the teacher asks questions, the children respond and the teacher echoes the correct response) reflects parent-child interactions during story reading and plays an important role in developing children's pre-literacy skills. Disbray (2008) identifies three patterns in adult-child interaction during story telling: a) gaining and maintaining a child's attention, b) using repetition in the narrations and c) engaging the child's collaboration. In PEAP classes the teacher scaffolds children's understanding of the meaning of a story in similar ways, through pictures, questions, discussions and activities that facilitate comprehension and acquisition. This process is very important and enhances both oracy and literacy since children can easily remember the rhythmic refrains and repetitive story patterns, and gradually learn to decode verbal text, understand how to read pictures and develop several thinking processes (Láng 2009).

Apart from play and storytelling, the performing arts constitute frequent and popular parts of the PEAP lessons. The children sing songs, dance and act out scenes from a story. Mimesis of this kind is fundamental to communication and culture (McCafferty 2008). When children play a game or act out a skit from a story, they do not just mime and move; they make meaning for themselves as well as for their interlocutors. They also expand their knowledge of cultures and grow intellectually, socially, emotionally and aesthetically (Crowe 2006). The pupils also practise arts and crafts, which develop their creativity and imagination, boost their self-esteem but most importantly involve them actively and enthusiastically in a learning experience. This reminds us of the fact that children are learning more than the English language in the PEAP classroom and that they are *happily* learning.

Noticeably PEAP pushes back on the trend promoting isolated language instruction and teaches English through stories, songs, drama and the like, embedding language

learning in the children's experiences. The multimodal nature of activities in the EYL syllabus clearly serves Cope and Kalantzis' (2009) conception of literacies, next to communication goals and helping children gain proficiency in basic social and academic language.

The next section briefly reviews some research studies regarding the introduction of PEAP, the positive effects on children and the change in attitudes towards the project among stakeholders.

2.2 *Empirical research about PEAP*

During the first two years of PEAP implementation, a large number of research studies were carried out from university researchers. This was clearly a situation where theory informed practice and in turn was informed by practice. A group of 175 teachers, who belonged in the materials evaluation team, evaluated the activities by filling out questionnaires. The results of their evaluation were fed into the materials development team, who revised and enriched the materials (Karavas 2014). Another survey investigated teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards the innovation. The results revealed that the teacher's attitudes became more positive by the end of the second year (Δενδρινού & Σταθοπούλου 2013) despite the fact that they were still facing a number of difficulties in terms of time, resources and organisational constraints (Dedousi 2012). Research investigating parents' attitudes towards the programme also showed a positive trend (Γιαννακάκη & Νικάκη 2013). According to the parents' opinions, children enjoyed the English classes and relayed words and songs in English at home (ibid). More studies were carried out on the profile of the English teachers who taught the PEAP classes (Δενδρινού & Αναστασίου 2013), the impact of the training programme on teachers' skills and perspectives (Καραβά & Ζουγανέλη 2013) as well as the impact of the e-training programme on teachers' professional development (Παπαδοπούλου 2013). Overall, the findings from all these studies revealed that the programme was evaluated positively.

A number of small scale studies from practitioners who implemented the programme and were able to see in the narrow sense what happened in the classroom also showed positive results: the young pupils were able to understand simple words, questions and routine instructions, and respond appropriately (Γιαννακοπούλου & Κοσοβίτσα 2013). They developed emergent literacy by making meaning from pictures, looking at their teacher reading a text and looking at the classroom print. They also developed to some extent the ability to act and communicate effectively in the social setting of the school and the classroom. Most importantly, the research results showed that the pupils were enthusiastic and motivated in the English classroom. They enjoyed play and hands-on experiences and eagerly participated in them.

Other studies found that the PEAP materials were developmentally and cognitively appropriate for the children (Kantzavelou 2014) and that children were intrinsically motivated by the activities as they were inherently interesting and enjoyable (Vrontzos 2012). Another study stressed the experiential nature of the activities and their positive impact on language development and the holistic development of children (Stamatopoulou 2013).

The remainder of this paper addresses the content and research findings about the 3rd grade syllabus.

3. Bridging the gap to conventional literacy in grade 3

3.1 A few words about 'Magic Books'

As already mentioned, in the first two grades of primary school, children learn to listen and speak English and develop emergent literacy skills. In grade 3 they also learn how to read and write in the new language. The acquisition of oral/aural vocabulary in the first two years facilitates the process of reading since learning to read requires making links between the spoken language and its writing system (Gregory 2008). There is an expectation, therefore, that when children go to grade 3, they will be able to map their limited knowledge of English onto a phonological system and learn to break the new code.

The teaching of reading can begin from word, sentence or text level. Each starting point produces different approaches to reading. Decoding-focused approaches, such as *phonics*, assume that the primary task in reading instruction is to help children discover the relationships between phonemes (sounds) and graphemes (letters) and build up from those to syllables and finally words. Meaning-focused approaches, such as *whole language,* stress the relationship between words or strings of words and their meaning. A *balanced* approach to literacy provides a synergic mix of both phonics and whole language and is considered effective because it helps children make connections between the two in the context of authentic reading (Donat 2006, Milne 2005).

In the English textbooks for grade 3, Magic Book 1 (Alexiou & Mattheoudakis 2014) and Magic Book 2 (Alexiou & Mattheoudakis 2013)[2], there is a recognisable phonics approach, with onsets (the initial consonants of words) and rimes (the remaining vowel and consonants) being highlighted so that they develop phonological awareness and provide a pattern for new words, thereby developing word recognition by analogy (Lewis & Ellis 2006, Wyse & Jones 2008). Phonics is taught with a wide range of synaesthetic, multisensory techniques and becomes an integral part of text exploration. Both books have the characteristics of a basal anthology with well-known stories, which are a simple account of the original versions and follow their own scenario in order to activate content schemata and make language more comprehensible to young children (Terzakou 2014).

The criterion for the selection of the vocabulary is not the frequency of occurrence but the meaning of the stories. Therefore, focal words such as *autumn* and *weasel* may be less easy to decode but are included because they come from the language of the stories. Of course most of the vocabulary consists of high frequency words and phrases organised in thematic areas, which are closely related to learners' interests and daily life. The acquisition of vocabulary is supported by a wide range of colourful illustrations and stimulated by a variety of activities including drama, games, songs, arts and crafts. Guessing the meaning of words from the context and the illustrations is something that the authors of the book want to encourage among all children and that is why they strongly advise teachers against pre-teaching the vocabulary (Alexiou & Mattheoudakis 2011).

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[2] Given that PEAP was not compulsory in all schools until 2016, it was necessary to design two textbooks for grade 3, where formal English learning started: Magic book 1 (Alexiou & Mattheoudakis 2014) for complete beginners (those children who had had no English before) and Magic book 2 (Alexiou & Mattheoudakis 2013) for the early A1 pupils (those who had already attended the two-year PEAP course).

In Magic Books there is clear emphasis not only on single words but also on lexical units, which are repeated many times so that children can recall them when the need to communicate arises. These lexical chunks or prefabricated phrases, commonly found together and typically related to functional use of language, are believed to be easier to store and retrieve because children learn and use them as single items. They carry more complex meaning than isolated words, familiarise children with grammatical and syntactic structures and thus are more useful for communication (ibid). This allows teachers to teach pupils how to read story language using a *whole language* approach.

Apart from conventional literacy, the book promotes cultural literacy (the ability to understand and participate in another culture), both *inter*cultural literacy - by featuring a number of stories adapted from European folktale, fairy tales and literature - and *intra*cultural literacy - by featuring Aesop's fables (the *Ant and the Cricket*), Greek myths (*Daedalus and Icarus*) and Greek literature (*Lady Decay* by Evgenios Trivizas). Some of the stories (*The ant and the cricket* and *The animal school*) carry strong moral, social, intercultural and cross-cultural values and messages, such as respect towards diversity, acceptance, enhancement of self-esteem and the development of an intercultural ethos of communication, all of which reiterate what the EYL curriculum has stated to be the pedagogical goals of English instruction (Trigoni 2014, Tzempetzi 2016).

Magic Books also give pupils the opportunity to immerse into a variety of cultures by incorporating appropriate cultural topics (e.g. animals, homes), pictures and place names. The four main characters (Lena, Tammy, Alex and Yuri) represent both genders and various ethnic backgrounds, promoting a multilingual and multicultural orientation (Galbeni 2015). However, their accent is standard RP. All the other characters appearing in the book are also prevalently British and their accents continue to be Native English Speakers (NESs). In fact, in all the EYL teaching/learning materials (PEAP and Magic Books), the listening input (stories and songs) adheres to Standard English and Standard Received Pronunciation. The accents are overwhelmingly Inner Circle, Anglophone ones. Interestingly the songs in the book are not typical of, say, British, Irish or American folk music; therefore they do not expose children to musical and cultural patterns typical of the target language community (Psarraki 2013).

3.2 Empirical research about Magic Books

This paper synthesises findings from small-scale studies carried out in primary schools in order to evaluate the use of Magic Books in the third grade. Two of these studies (Damianou 2013, Konstantopoulou 2014) investigate the efficacy of the balanced literacy model via the use of traditional and digital storybooks. Another study (Mantziari 2013) examines the efficacy of analytic phonics and the whole word (Look and Say) approach. To harvest data, all three studies used similar research methods: a battery of custom made reading-aloud tests comprising of 'real word' and 'pseudo word' decoding tasks, 'read language chunks' and 'read and match' tasks, as well as classroom observation, teacher diaries, recordings of classroom reading and student questionnaires.

In the first two studies, the teachers developed a parallel story-based syllabus, which was tightly integrated into the 3rd grade syllabus and used as a kind of transition from decoding simple words to the reading of stories. Damianou (2013) created her own Big Books as parallel versions of MB with the same characters in an attempt to extend the vocabulary in new but familiar contexts. Konstantopoulou (2014) selected

a set of e-books with stories coming from the textbook but with richer authentic input. Both researchers designed activities for the manipulation of phonemes (blending, segmentation, substitution) and comprehension activities to help children develop higher order processes. Overall, the findings from the research studies showed that the pupils improved not only their decoding but also their comprehension skills.

The third study examined the role of phonics with an emphasis on sight vocabulary and rapid word recognition. Mantziari (2013) based her research on the Dual Route theory (Dombey 2009), which advocates that children can follow two routes to decoding: a lexical and a non lexical one (orthographic). In each of these routes, the child uses different reading strategies: the *phonemic* strategy whereby the child translates the word into its phonemic representation and then uses this representation to retrieve the meaning of a word, and the *visual* strategy where the child uses the visual information of the word to retrieve the meaning. The supplementary input for this study came from a textbook using a dual route to decoding. Mantziari (2013) used 2 groups, a control group that used MB and an experimental group that used a supplementary textbook next to MB. With the experimental group the teacher presented words with flashcards and children moved from choral reading (repeating after the teacher) to echoing (reading one beat behind the teacher) to individual reading. Mantziari (2013) did not observe any significant differences between the two groups.

The results of the *decoding* task in all three studies revealed that with phonics (the dominant approach in Magic Books) children developed sensitivity to phonological awareness and improved their decoding skills to a great extent. The findings also showed that overt phonics instruction supported children with difficulties in reading. Although the opacity of the English language can create some problems to the Greek learners, who have to switch from a more transparent orthography in Greek to a less transparent orthography in English (Goswami 2008), it seems that Magic Books help children blend or "syncretise" (Kelly, Gregory & Williams' (2001) term), L1 and L2 literacies.

A number of studies evaluating the textbooks, reported on the easiness and speed with which children pick up, remember and use long and complex lexical chunks when they act out their favourite stories (Psarraki 2013, Tsolaki 2016, Tzempetzi 2016). Some lexical chunks acquired (e.g. *It's so hot, It's raining, I'm so hungry, Don't be lazy, You're right),* which are systematically recycled in the textbook in a variety of ways, were recurrently and naturally used by learners throughout the school year (Trigoni 2014).

According to another small-scale study (Imprisimi 2012), a large number of children (77%) were found to be familiar with the story collections in the textbooks. This familiarity of cultural content is important for the activation of background knowledge and inner lexicon, and facilitates their literacy experiences (Stuart, Stainthorp & Snowling 2008). However, 98% of the children in the previous study were also reported to have relied heavily on the story illustrations for comprehension and guesswork (Imprisimi 2012).

The importance of stories in literacy development is paramount. In the evaluation studies reported below (and clearly many more), the majority of the teacher participants (82%) reported positive opinions about the textbook, such as the use of stories for vocabulary presentation and practice (Partheniadi 2012), a finding substantiated by relevant literature (Cameron 2001). In another study, the vast majority of children were found to have positive feelings about the stories and the

activities in the textbook, which in turn had an impact on their motivation and learning outcomes (Gakou 2012, Imprisimi 2012, Trigoni 2014).

4. Closing remarks

The findings from the studies reported in this paper show that:

   a) There is considerable positive feedback from teachers and children on English Language Learning (ELL) in the early grades of primary school.
   b) The learning of English is seen as beneficial in terms of developing cultural understanding and social skills.
   c) Children are becoming literate in a new language in multimodal ways and the majority are enjoying the experience.

The empirical data is consistent with the theory underpinning EYL and shows that the EYL innovation has influenced the mindset of goals, methods and expectations teachers bring into the classroom by building on the scientific consensus about how children learn, by giving them choice and by encouraging them to go beyond conventional practices. As a result, the early ELL experiences in the primary school, based on PEAP materials and Magic Books, engage pupils in powerful literacy practices and enable them to reap the linguistic, cognitive, social and emotional benefits highlighted by relevant research. With this new pedagogical orientation towards multiliteracies, children gradually develop an understanding not only of how the linguistic code (e.g. phonics) operates but also how language operates within society. They also develop awareness that certain cultural understandings and values are universal, thus making sense not only of new words but also of new worlds (Gregory 2008).

In short this paper has attempted to throw light on current policies and practices regarding the education of English language learners in the early primary school. However, further research studies will form a stronger evidence base for early language learning. Such insider perspectives are essential for understanding educational practices and relationships but they are always partial and subject to further expansion and refinement.

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Alexia Giannakopoulou holds a B.A. in English Language and Literature from the University of Athens, a M.Ed. in TESOL from the Hellenic Open University and a Ph.D. in Social and Cultural Studies from the University of Koblenz-Landau, Germany. She is co-author of EFL books and teaching materials for primary and secondary school. She is Member of the "Materials Development, Test Development and Training" Team of the RCeL. She has taught courses at the University of Koblenz-Landau and the University of Athens and since 2011 she teaches TEYL at the M.Ed. in TESOL of the Hellenic Open University. She is also a school advisor and teacher trainer for English Language Teachers in Delta Athens school district. Currently she is member of the IEP "Committee on Foreign Languages".

giannakopoulou.alexia@ac.eap.gr