

# *Linguistic Diversity in Greek Education: Bilingualism and the Utilization of the Mother Language for the Development of an Inclusive Educational Environment*

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**Abstract** – Current literature often refers to the importance of the mother language to the enhancement of the inclusion process for students' with diverse socio-cultural background. Indeed, when the linguistic ability of students is developed in two or more languages affects positively the inclusion of these students to their new school environment. The aim of this literature review was the analysis of linguistic diversity in the Greek educational system. Moreover, to illustrate the utilization of the mother language of the students for the development of an inclusive educational environment. The method which was used to analyze this topic was the literature review in conventional libraries and international digital scientific databases such as Scopus and Google Scholar. The results emphasize the positive benefits of bilingualism in students' school progress as well as in their linguistic and intellectual development. Most researchers highlight the importance of having mother language classes for all learners who come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, since by learning their mother language they can fully develop the second language, both communicatively and academically. In conclusion, learning outcomes for bilingual students are even better when the use of previous knowledge from their mother language and culture is allowed, encouraged and maximized, thus accelerating the process of learning the new language.

**Keywords** – Mother Language, Inclusive Education, Bilingualism, Greek Language.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the school attendance of students with different mother languages and cultures coming from other countries in Greece has highlighted the research interest on cultural diversity (Papadopoulou, 2009; Skourtou, 2008). This cultural diversity requires the adoption of different pedagogical approaches and a change of educational goals for the benefit of bilingual or multilingual students. Therefore, the creation of new learning and cognitive conditions to cater for the needs of these students is necessary (Skourtou, 2008).

Although, in Greece, there have been made some efforts towards multicultural education from the beginning of the 80's so that the different culture of students who speak other languages is integrated and accepted into the Greek school (Askouni, 2001). The general governmental educational policy remain monolingual and one-dimensional with negative results in the education of foreigners, as they feel the devaluation of their language and cultural background (Papadopoulou, 2009). In this new reality of modern multicultural societies, schools and teachers need to redefine their roles so that speakers of other languages can be included into their new culture, progress at school, and build social relationships (Cummins, 2005). This is achieved by offering to

them the opportunity to learn their new language through the teaching of their mother language, as bilingual education has shown spectacular results (Protonotariou & Haravitsidis, 2007).

In Greece, at an elementary school in Athens, where 72% of the students were speaking foreign languages, Albanian language classes were organized and offered first, after the initiative of the school community, as the majority of the students' mother language was Albanian, and then Arabic language classes were also offered. The positive results both in their progress at school and in the Greek language, as well as in their positive emotions, led the Hellenic Ministry of Education to approve the creation of mother language tutoring departments at the school (Protonotariou & Haravitsidis, 2007). However, there is a significant lack on research related with the current status of bilingualism in the Greek educational system.

## **II. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE PEDAGOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF MOTHER LANGUAGE TEACHING**

Languages are an asset of all humanity, as they are the main means of communication between people, and are identified with the national origin and culture of the individual (Sella - Mazi, 2016; Skourtou, 2001). When the linguistic ability of students is developed in two or more languages, then they have a cognitive advantage, since the knowledge of the language and of the national culture of their new country on top of the knowledge of their own mother language and culture, affects their positive inclusion of these students to their new school environment (Papadopoulou, 2009).

Current school community includes students speaking other languages than Greek, in a system characterized by pedagogical monolingualism. Their learning success or failure is inextricably linked to their ability to use the Greek language at their school / academic institution as the teacher teaches in the standard language, regardless of whether there are students in his or her class with a different mother Language (Skourtou, 2001). The concept of the mother language is defined as the first language that a person learns and is determined in each case by the ability, the origin, the high degree of mastery, etc. (Sella - Mazi, 2016). The concept of bilingualism concerns the alternating use of two or more languages, as well as the ability to compose and process concepts by the same person (Skourtou, 2008). Thus, the identity of bilingual persons is determined by the exchange of codes, when in their attempt to communicate they use two or more languages (Skourtou, 2002). The bilingual ability of students has multiple positive benefits in their educational context, as the interdependence of languages and the exchange of codes enhances creative and flexible thinking (Skourtou, 2002).

Cummins (2005) emphasizes the positive benefits of bilingualism in school progress as well as in the linguistic and intellectual development of students in his two theories. According to the first, that of the additional form of bilingualism, with the addition of a second language (L2), ie the school language, the development of the mother Language (L1) is not burdened, on the contrary, the L2 bases its development on the L1, expanding the linguistic capacity as a whole. If children succeed in achieving perfect bilingualism, that is, in acquiring proficiency in both languages, then they will be able to acquire all the necessary cognitive skills for their academic success.

The second theory, the principle of language interdependence, is based on the belief that the greater the competence in the L1, the easier it will be to master the L2, due to the interdependence between the two languages in the transfer of conceptual knowledge and skills (Cummins, 2005; Skourtou, 2001; Fragoudaki, 2003). In order to understand this theory, Cummins likens the bilingual student's brain to a balloon, at the base of which there are two openings for inflation. Any information entering the balloon either from the opening of the L1 or from that of the L2 is understood on a common basis for both languages, which is defined as common underlying linguistic ability (Cummins, 2005; Skourtou, 2001). Furthermore, the bilingual ability is like a "double iceberg", the two peaks of which are the surface features of the L1 and the L2, while at its base lie all the conceptual and linguistic experiences of the bilingual student which constitute his underlying linguistic ability; this ability in turn is related to cognitive school requirements (Cummins, 2005; Skourtou, 2001). After all, it is the academic ability that regulates the success in the students' school progress and helps in the synthesis of the various forms of oral and written speech, transferring their already developed academic language ability from the L1 to the L2 (Hatzidaki, 2014).

From all the above we understand the importance of having mother Language classes for all learners who come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, since by learning their mother language they can fully develop the L2, both communicatively and academically.

The pedagogical significance of the operation of mother language departments is positively evaluated through a brief historical review. This was initially pointed out by the existence of bilingual programs in ancient Greece and Rome (Tsiakalos, 2004). In 1950, Unesco highlighted the crucial role that preserving the mother language of foreign students plays a significant role in their smooth schooling (Castellotti, 2008). According to Cummins (2001), the research of Baker (2000) and Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) show that the mother language contributes positively to the linguistic development of the individual. In Greece, Protonotariou and Charavitzidis (2006) reported that through the successful organization of mother language classes for Albanian-speaking students, benefits in the following areas ensued: in the progress of the students' school performance, in the building of their self-confidence, in establishing mutual respect and mutual assistance, as well as in better cooperation among students, teachers and parents. In addition, in an Elementary School in Paris, the operation of classes for teaching the basic curriculum subjects in Arabic had a positive impact on the students' school progress (Castellotti, 2008). In 2011-12, the implementation of Action 5 of the Act "Education of foreign and repatriated students", which concerns primary and secondary school children with Albanian or Russian mother Language, benefited not only the students, but also the teachers of the mother Language (Dimitriadou, Synodi), Tzakosta, & Revythiadou, 2012).

### **III. SUPPORT FOR MOTHER LANGUAGE DEPARTMENTS IN THE CURRICULA**

The New Greek society is characterized by cultural and linguistic diversity, and this is reflected in the curricula which stress the importance of learning the mother language. It is stated that the inclusion of these people should not be overlooked by the Greek educational system, so that they are not isolated but enabled to communicate with their wider social environment while, at the same time, they are also helped to retain their mother Language and cultural heritage.

While we would expect there would be a clear position with suggestions as to how to teach the mother language and how to include these students in Greek schools, that simple reference in the curricula is characterized by generalities without any practical application. Thus, teachers remain non-participants and simple observers, without the support of a framework; they teach only in the L2 and the teaching and inclusion of bilingual students is the sole responsibility of their families (Skourtou, 2005). That is to say, Greek schools as educational institutes approach the mother language of foreign students as a problem that must be overcome by making them learn Greek, while they consider the learning of their mother Language to be a family or individual problem that is solved outside the school (Skourtou, 2005).

### **IV. PRACTICES FOR UTILIZATION OF LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN THE GREEK SCHOOL**

Social contacts and family intervention for learning the Greek language are inadequate and without substantial results. Teachers play an important role in the teaching of academic language skills to students speaking other languages. Specifically, through pedagogical techniques and educational strategies, they create the appropriate learning environment in which the cultural and linguistic identity of the students is strengthened, providing appropriate cognitive challenges (Hatzidaki, 2015). This achievement is based on a two-element model of Cummins (2005), the first being the contextual support that the teacher offers to the student, while the second is the cognitive challenge of academic tasks out of which academic development will occur. This model consists of a four-quadrant shape, where the B quadrant is responsible for the student's educational development, as it provides both mental challenges and appropriate contextual support (Cummins, 2005; Skourtou, 2001; Hatzidaki, 2014).

Based on this model, Cummins (2005) proposes five educational strategies for organizing the teaching of L2 students in a classroom. Specifically, he proposes the activation of the previous knowledge and experiences of the student and the utilization of the existing cognitive background, the supportive and interactive role of the teacher who will strengthen the identity of these students by fostering a climate of respect and mutual understanding, and the emphasis on any new information so that it can be understood, thus contributing to the development of critical thinking and literacy. In addition, there should be emphasis on language and on the critical analysis of all language dimensions (forms and use of language) and finally, language should be used for creating new knowledge, and literature should be incorporated in the curriculum in the effort to include foreign students into their new social reality.

In the modern Greek school, both in primary and in secondary education, various pedagogical practices are applied which are aimed at the recognition and creative utilization of linguistic diversity. These practices are based on the Cummins model described above and include collaborative activities as well as interdisciplinary and peer-to-peer teaching methods, for instance projects, where students actively participate during the course (Androusou & Magos, 2001; Cummins, 2005; Hatzidaki, 2014). Specific

examples of these techniques are: theatrical plays and role playing, puzzles, multimedia teaching material, illustrations and graphs which make the lesson more accessible and understandable, group text writing or play writing, creative writing and calendars, as well as various other experiential activities (Androusou & Magos, 2001; Cummins, 2005; Hatzidaki, 2014). At the same time, activities such as vocabulary cards where next to each new word the students fill in its equivalent word in the L1, contribute to the acquisition of a better academic conceptual framework in both languages. Apart from this, however, the division of every class into mixed ability groups, where children seek and exchange information, increases the ability not only of self-correction but also of the correction of others, while strengthening the identity of students (Hatzidaki, 2014). In addition, we should not fail to mention the use of technology in the classroom and its benefits in the linguistic perception of the L2, in lexical development and in the self-perception of students through techniques such as: board games and online games with words, songs, movies and videos, that make the lesson more interesting and help in memorization (Kourti-Kazoulli, 2016).

Finally, intercultural educational programs and bilingual educational practices through project work and art, as well as differentiated learning, utilize the mother Language and facilitate the learning of the L2 (Androusou & Magos, 2001).

## V. CONCLUSIONS

Taking into consideration all the above and studying theoretical approaches and their implementation related to the creation of mother language teaching classes we realize that they produce positive pedagogical results. We also realize that strengthening bilingualism benefits students not only in the development of their language skills, but also in their cognitive and identity development (Skourtou, 2008). After all, learning outcomes for bilingual students are even better when the use of previous knowledge from their mother language and culture is allowed, encouraged and maximized, thus accelerating the process of learning the new language. However, the Greek educational system and the curriculum do not seem to be able to effectively manage linguistic heterogeneity in schools. While recognizing the importance of preserving the mother language and the inclusion of foreigners into society, they have not made any concrete proposals for corresponding programmes with practical applications (Papadopoulou, 2009). Because of this, teachers try to find solutions on their own, through a variety of educational activities and techniques, based on Cummins's theoretical principles. The educational system of Greece, therefore, must educate bilingual children properly, strengthening both their cultural heritage and their identity, and at the same time introduce them to the Greek language and smoothly include them into the Greek society.

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