

# Pilot Literature Teaching in Thrace Muslim Minority



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**Abstract** This chapter presents the first findings of a pilot implementation of the use of new books and educational materials for the teaching of Literature in the three classes of public high schools. It involves six teachers from different types of schools (i.e. a school with a Muslim population, a school with a mixed population, city schools, rural schools, minority schools). The ultimate aim of the pilot application was to find out whether and how the teaching materials of the Project for the Education of the Muslim Minority in Thrace (PEM) can be used in the framework of the new curriculum to improve the school performance of Muslim pupils, their Greek-language skills and interest in literary reading.

**Keywords** Literature teaching · Junior high school · Minority education · Muslim minority · Minority schools

## 1 The Subject of Literature in Minority Education

During its long course of intervention in minority education, one of the many actions of the Project for the Education of the Muslim Minority in Thrace (PEM) has been reforming the school textbooks for the subject of literature in lower secondary education (high school), as well as changing the ways in which this subject is taught. During the periods between 2002–2004 and 2006–2007, PEM produced

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new educational materials and textbooks for the subject of literature, tailored to the specific needs of Muslim-minority students in Thrace (Apostolidou & Hodolidou 2007).

The starting point for the Project's intervention in the subject of literature has been a confirmed weakness and a consequent need. The confirmed and well documented weakness of minority students involves the ability to read extensive texts, literary or not, i.e. a weakness to comprehend, to make meaning of and to utilize these texts in any significant way, both in their everyday lives and in their learning history (Smith 2006). The students, therefore, need to be supported through interventions in the content of the subject of literature, in the ways it is organized and in the teaching methodology in order to gradually familiarize themselves with reading various increasingly longer texts and to develop their cultural capital, their skills in self-expression and communication, their confidence and their critical abilities.

We turn to the personal dimension of literature in order to comprehend and decipher our everyday realities and our place in a complex, polyphonic world. Our relation to literature is, in essence, a relation of accommodating the Other, helping us shape our personal and historical experiences, to orientate ourselves within an increasingly more complicated social and cultural environment and to form our individual and collective identities.

During the last 20 years or so, due to the qualities literature had been invested with in the past, it has been allocated a primary role both in various programs for minority education, as well as in every single national school curriculum that has been revised to satisfy inter-cultural education principles.<sup>1</sup> In both cases, the subject of literature has gained eminence as an advantageous medium for cultivating the ethical values and principles of a multi-cultural society, i.e. a society in which various cultural identities and traditions coexist, intercommunicate, and create without exclusions or stigmas (Mac Dougal 1981, Rendon 1995).

On this basis, we believe that the taught subject of literature plays a vital role in the educational curriculum for minority students in Thrace, and that it can contribute in its own unique way to the accomplishment of the Project's aim. In other words, the aim is to render all students of these schools capable of integrating and contributing on an equal basis to any of the processes, developments, and institutions that are daily transforming, both their specific, as well as their wider financial, social and cultural environments.

## 2 Educational Methods

Although the PEM's materials for the subject of literature should be compatible with the New School (NS) National Curriculum, their design went beyond the teaching of fragmentary texts in the school classroom to introduce the concept of

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., see Australian Education Council and Curriculum Corporation (1994), on the case of Australia, and Protherough (1995) on the case of England.

teaching units, i.e. a flexibility in the selection of texts to be taught, as well as the teaching of literary works in their entirety.<sup>2</sup>

On the level of teaching, it proposed the development of alternative teaching methods beyond the traditional teacher-centered ones, in order to achieve the active participation of students and to support their ability to express themselves in language. The new direction given was now student-centered, and the dominant proposition was that of teaching in groups. Other suggestions included the implementation of various methods such as dramatization as a learning tool, the project-method, as well as the introduction and use of other art forms in order to support the multimodality of students' expression through drawing, comics, music, singing and cinema (Apostolidou et al. 2000).

### 3 Teaching Units Instead of Single Texts

The teaching unit is a complete reading and learning process, which combines verbal and non-verbal activities and connects texts, either literary or not, with each other to form a communicational whole. The teaching unit is structured around a body of texts that are interrelated on the basis of a common element: theme, genre to which they belong, perspective, mood, etc (Sloan Davies 1991: 154). Texts, in the framework of a teaching unit, are not to be read separately, or consequently, but simultaneously, by different groups of students, who exchange their experience of the wider context of issues addressed by the unit.

The suggested texts for each unit are of various genres and have been selected according to the following criteria: the texts should be in the common modern Greek language, without elements from previous forms of the language or idiomatic expressions, which would make them harder to be understood by students of limited proficiency in Greek. The themes must be attractive and relevant to the interests of children and young adults. There has been considerable effort to include, where possible, texts about experiences of young Muslims, e.g. a text on a pilgrimage to Mecca, or another under the title *Wearing jeans and a niqab*, about the experience of a teenage Muslim girl in a western European country.

The most important criterion, however, was the variety of the texts in order for the students to come into contact with as many genres as possible (e.g. poetry, short stories, novels, biographies, autobiographies, satires, songs, plays, comics) and to develop a variety of reading strategies. Another important criterion was the possibility of dialogue between texts, and comparisons among them in the context of the same unit, so that the latter's educational targets can be served more successfully. A text, in other words, is included if it adds a new perspective to the unit's topic. As

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<sup>2</sup>The unit approach is consonant with the teaching method developed by Sloan Davis, G.S. (1991: 154). Using examples from many bilingual-education programmes, Jim Cummins highlights the importance of both thematic structured learning and unit approach as aids for the teacher (Cummins 1999: 130–131).

understood from the above, criteria such as a specific ratio of Greek in relation to foreign literature or a pre-decided list of great authors that ought to be taught were not in our agenda, at least not for the two first years of lower secondary education.

Each teaching unit is designed, based on the plan of a project, which is adjusted to the particularities of the subject of literature. Its duration is 2 to 3 months, depending on the frequency of lessons and the planned activities. As with all projects, the teaching of our units is developed in phases, each one set with a distinct goal. These phases are usually three and are defined by a logic that is quite different from the logic of the standardized teaching of literature at school, or from the one related to the tripartite course of teaching.

Roughly speaking, the first phase, which we named *prior to reading*, aims to introduce and make students sensitive to the topic and subject matter of the unit. Its principal aim is to provide incentives for the reading that will follow and to expand the linguistic and cultural horizon of students, creating a context of questioning that will facilitate the extraction of meaning.

The second phase, *while reading*, is perhaps the most important as we proceed to the teaching and studying of the texts. In this one, students are asked to read short texts or excerpts, longer texts (short stories, whole chapters from novels), or entire books, in school or at home. This phase is of a longer duration as it consists of many sub-stages of escalating difficulty. In other words, we begin from shorter and easier to comprehend texts, continue with longer and more difficult ones, to conclude with the reading of books cover to cover.

Each class, depending on ability, can in theory move on to as many stages as possible. It is exactly during this phase that group work assumes its greater significance. This is usually organized in the following way: the class is divided into groups and each group is responsible of reading and presenting a different text. In the context of the group, students help each other and negotiate the meaning of the text: one might have better understood a particular point, while someone else another, so they can exchange views, and make better use of each other's skills. When they finally appear in front of the class to present their texts and their homework, they have overcome the 'anxiety to find the meaning' that plagues every student, and, especially, the ones with weaknesses due to poor language skills or cultural capital.

Finally, there is a third and last phase, which is usually called *after reading*. During this phase, students produce their own discourse, not around the texts anymore but in relation to the topic of the teaching unit they were involved with.

Teaching materials for all 3 years of lower secondary education, are permeated and organized by a number of specific common principles that consequently lead to similarities in their form as well. Educators are given a complete teaching framework, along with theoretical and educational support, clear aims and objectives, and teaching methodology, involving specific activities for students. Emphasis is given to the parallel reading of texts, in order for each text to shed light to another and to increase the possibilities for the students (of a class for which diversity is a given) to find texts that are more appropriate for them.

#### **4 The Pilot Implementation of the PEM Materials for the Subject of Literature**

The new proposal for the teaching of literature and the educational materials produced by PEM were implemented for a number of years in the Compensatory Education Classes of quite a few secondary schools in Thrace: i.e. during lessons outside the set timetable, and for students who volunteered to attend classes of supplementary teaching in specific subjects, and by educators who also volunteered to participate in the Project. These educators also underwent many hours of further training organized each year by the literature team, and their comments, suggestions and feedback from applying materials in their classrooms were utilized in shaping the final proposal for the teaching of literature.

Furthermore, educational materials for literature are never static. Each teacher was responsible for the final choice and the adjustment of the appropriate educational materials to the needs and capabilities of their classroom. However, the fragmentary nature of the materials' application outside the school timetable, as implemented by teachers in further training in the framework of the PEM (to a relatively limited number of students, on the side of teaching the subject according to the NC during school hours), and despite the positive responses reported by these teachers, did not allow for safe conclusions in regards with the contribution of the material to the school performance of the Muslim students.

This is the reason we designed the pilot application of the educational materials. The particular application for the subject of literature aimed at testing the relevant PEM material within the official curriculum of specific lower secondary schools in Thrace. The ultimate aim of the pilot was to discover if and in which way the PEM educational material could be utilized towards the improvement of the performance of Muslim students, the development of their learning of Greek and reading of literature. The teaching proposal is absolutely compatible with the New Curriculum for the subject of literature, which was also in the stage of pilot implementation in specific schools in various parts of Greece during the 2012–2013 school year.

#### **5 The Selection of the Pilot Classes and the Educators**

Although the number of educators and the selected classes was limited (i.e. the classes participating in the Project and the respective teachers involved were just six), a great deal of effort was applied to make the selection as representative as possible. The teachers selected were working in the two regions where the Project was being implemented. That is, they were working in schools with exclusively Muslim populations, but also in schools with mixed population. There were pilot classes both in city and rural schools (e.g. in villages of the plains and in the mountainous areas), with Turkish and Pomak-speaking students, but also with Roma students. There were classes in all 3 years of lower secondary school participating in the Project.

At the same time, there was a choice to have a varied team of educators: (a) teachers who had been involved with the PEM in previous years through supplementary teaching, and therefore were further trained in the new teaching proposal and (b) teachers without prior connection to the Project, but who were specialized in their undergraduate or postgraduate studies in literature, intra-cultural education, or in education in general. The aim was to have as much of a representative sample as possible in the selection of students and teachers alike. In other words, it was decided that the implementation team for the pilot should be as close as possible to the conditions of a comprehensive application of the Project.

## 6 The Teaching Proposal and the Lesson Plans

Educators systematically observed their students' performance by keeping individual folders with their homework and notes on each one of them. The final document they had to submit was their lesson plans together with a complete report evaluating their intervention. It included a detailed report on the improvement of their students' performance, placing emphasis on specific students as case studies. The educators who had undertaken the duty to produce, apply, and evaluate teaching plans based them on the principles and the methodology suggested by the PEM's material, but also took under consideration the new Education Syllabus (ES) for the subject of literature.

The lesson plans initially emerged from the work of educators who had taken part in the PEM's further training. They were used as a basic tool for the innovations of the pilot. Lesson plans are not 'exemplary' texts in the sense of traditional 'exemplary teaching' of the past. They are examples of teaching founded upon the following logic. They are orientated towards teaching a unit of literature. Their recipient is the community of educators, they are student-centered and not teacher-centered, i.e. their content primarily addresses the way of work suggested to the students and not the material to be taught. In other words, the kinds of activities (and not necessarily questions) that would be given to them.

Moreover, the lesson plans indicate how teaching and the allocation of projects would be differentiated (individually or in groups), how the groups could be formed, and how work could be done. Clear, succinct, and realistic, each lesson plan could be taught unchanged or modified by the teacher who applies it, so that it could be adjusted to their own needs and their real classroom conditions.

In practice, each educator applied more than one lesson plan each year (especially in year three, as the lesson plans for that year are a lot shorter), in order to work along the lines of the New Education Syllabus of the New School, which was also using lesson plans. During the years the Pilot was taking place, educators became action researchers in their own classes, solving problems of a pedagogical nature (e.g. discipline, resistance from students about being taught in groups), but also purely philological, from the comprehension of the didactic philosophy of the Project to the amelioration of both their own teaching and their students' understanding of the chosen material. The team was operating as a collective 'critical

friend', exchanging work sheets, ideas, and material. That is also because, admittedly, the units were not finally taught as designed but enhanced and altered, having been molded by the personality of each individual teacher.

## 7 First Conclusions on the Implementation of the Pilot for the Subject of Literature<sup>3</sup>

The evaluation of the pilot was based on the teachers' monthly and final reports on their work, as well as the interviews completed at the end of each year. We think that we can safely suggest that the reports, to a large extent, accurately recorded everything happening in the classes of application, and that they did not present an edited version of the situation or the results.

Besides, most of the educators participating in the Project exhibited a self-critical disposition and were notably eager to place emphasis on plans that were not bringing the results they expected. Everyone involved seemed to be conscious of the fact that they are all members of a team with common goals, aims, and intentions, and that a positive spirit of collaboration, without any personal agendas and competitions between them was necessary in order to successfully reach any of the above. As they were people with very strong and diverse personalities, skills, and of various levels of knowledge, they were able to function with respect towards each other's individual personalities, as well as towards their different ways of work.

[...] it helped me a great deal because I was borrowing ideas and learning other ways of work used by my colleagues, and, I think, I would use their ideas in another, let's say, if I was to teach another similar lesson. All this helped me in general, they put me at ease, they informed me, all of this [...].

During the 3 years of the pilot implementation, the ease with which educators used *teaching in groups* has really evolved. The work sheets that educators were giving their students were improved, not focusing any more on monitoring the latter's comprehension and the learning of information, but they were adjusted to PEM's view for the subject of literature. The sheets gave students an opportunity to express their imagination, motivating them towards combinatory and creative projects, demanding comparisons between texts, etc.

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<sup>3</sup>The Pilot actions and the conclusions reached through their evaluation, were presented and discussed in scientific conferences (at the international conference of the International Board on Books for Young People [IBBY] in Mexico, at a conference organised by the Hellenic Educational Society in Florina, Greece, and at an international conference co-organised by the universities of Toronto, the University of Crete, and the University of the Aegean, in Rhodes under the title *Rethinking Language, Diversity & Education*), while some of the teaching scenarios produced by educators have been presented in special day-conferences organised by the PEM. Finally, a personal experience from each educator's participation in the Pilot has been recored in the form of testimonies in the collective volume *Soon We Grow: Testimonies of educators on the teaching of literature in the context of the Project for the Education of the Muslim Minority*. Daniil, Christos & Hodolidou, Eleni (Eds.) (2015).

In the context of their participation in the pilot application of the subject of literature, and using the educational materials produced by the PEM, the educators were asked to design, implement and evaluate/assess teaching scenarios, tailored to the educational needs of the classes involved in the application. During this process, the objections of some of the educators to the philosophy and functionality of the suggested materials were bent. These objections were related to the unwillingness of some teachers of Greek and literature to leave behind the historical and textual approach of literature.

The educators' inability to put to practice other teaching methods beyond the direct, teacher-centered one, was another impediment that was successfully overcome with time. *Teaching in groups, drama in education, the project method* have now become the norm in teaching and organizing the material. The positive results achieved by the implementation of these new methods (although there were obvious differentiations and variations from classroom to classroom), were now visible, and they motivated them to continue their application and to overcome any potential insecurities and/or objections.

The concept of the unit consisting of three distinct phases was eventually understood, and, during the second year, the units were covered more successfully than in the first year of the application, when, in some cases, the duration of the first, preparatory phase and of the third one (which concluded the reading process), was not as extended as it should. Educators were also starting to improvise in the selection of literary texts, proceeding to the use of multi-modal texts in the classroom (e.g. watching movies).

[...] OK, I don't think that the children have learned to work properly in groups in the space of a single year, in the sense that they are now able to share, to divide responsibilities and participation equally among them. I think, however, that they took a very important step. The mere thing that has been imprinted upon their minds, that in a group we all have to participate, and that it shouldn't be one person that does all the work, is I think, a first, small stepping stone. If this were to continue, I hope that it does continue in the following years of school, and that it is also expanded, i.e. to be the case for other subjects as well, that would be great [...]

[...] What I have learned is to be able to move between various texts –because when I was a student myself, I was used to work on one text at a time –, and that made me understand that some texts complete each other, that there is a dialogue between texts in that way, that one is able to have a slightly more general, more holistic view of a topic, and to help (speaking for myself here), I think, it helped the children too. This single text every time, that no matter if you got it or not, you have to deal with it, this is what I got rid of [...]

In the parametres that contributed to the successful progress of the pilot application for the subject of literature we will have to include, to a larger or lesser degree, the following:

- The high level of the educators' training and its innovative teaching methods, due to a large extent to their attendance in the further training seminars organized by the PEM;
- The educational material produced by the PEM and at the teachers' disposal, which became the basis for the material utilized by them during their participation in the pilot;



- The self-motivation and initiative of the educators in renewing the material, to complete it with new multimodal material, and to tailor it to the different needs of each class;
- The constant, albeit discreet, supervision and guidance the educators had during the entire school year from the people responsible for the Project, in order to improve their planning and to respond to any difficulties they face in action during the educational process;
- The development of collaborative relations between all parties involved in the operation, by the exchange of experiences, good practices, and advice, mainly during the monthly Group Advisory Meetings;
- The technical and material support offered by the PEM to the educational needs of the application classes;

Also, or mostly, the following:

- The positive response of students to the experiment and the improvement of their performance, which both provided educators with constant motivation to continue their efforts.

The most important success of the pilot implementation on the level of the educators involved, was that, through their participation, the latter have fully understood the way self-education and self-improvement work. They are now able to improvise on and/or to alter existent material. They search online for additional material, use dramatization, make good use of multimodal texts in their lessons. They have the self-confidence that they can improve both their teaching, as, most importantly, the performance of their students at school. They have become perceptive observers of themselves and of their students. In short, they each have constructed the identity of an educator-researcher who is able, to a larger or lesser degree, and in diverse ways, to present and share their work in public, within the educational community.

However, we believe that overall the most important contribution of the pilot trial was the positive response of the students, the increase of their desire for reading, and their reading competency, their enthusiasm about their participation in the Project, and the progress in their performance, as reported in the educators' reports. In general, the attitude of the students has been positive. Any resistance exhibited was in regard to working in groups, that seemed unusual to them at first, but, later on, they seemed to enjoy it very much, and even the misgivings of the most shy ones among them about team work were eventually overcome.

[...] When finally, everything was on track, their response was enthusiastic! They liked being taught in groups, the fact that the texts had topics that were familiar to them. They participated in discussions, they were brave enough to present their views, and responded positively to all the activities, discovering new ways to express themselves [...]

[...] The pilot really was the crowning of this whole enterprise and we sometimes felt the lesson was "taking off". The majority of students like to work in groups, the collaboration, the creative "noise" [...]

[...] They surely improved in spoken Greek as they came into contact with the texts, and spoke, read, expressed themselves, and what interests me the most is that they got to love and enjoy reading literature [...]

On our question whether their knowledge and skills concerning literature were improved:

[...] children are a little freer now, I think the attitude generated through the subject of literature is positive [...]

On the effect of the Project on the performance of students:

[...] it helps them improve a lot, in my opinion, in regards with this particular point, to learn to work in the classroom, to learn to work together, to follow a tactic ... following a tactic, in other words, helped; it taught children how to work. I was surprised that the work was actually done that way, and every time it did get done [...]

In total, from the educators' reports, but also from the student-progress reports we have in our hands, it became clear that there is an upward trajectory in student performance, not necessarily a spectacularly upward trajectory, but a visible progress in the performance of all the students, mainly in their spoken Greek and in their participation in the lessons. This is easy to understand, as the majority of the students come from low economic backgrounds and, therefore, improvement in the spoken language is much easier to achieve than in writing. What remains to be ascertained is whether this progress is stable and not due to the systematic nature of the particular program. In other words, what remains to be seen is if this progress will continue outside the Project.

The materials produced by the students during the pilot offer proof of the quality of work in the classes where it was applied, and also proof of their own positive attitudes toward the program. Certainly, so much remains to be examined still. We still need, for example, to examine the students' progress during the rest of their course at school, after their return to a more conventional way of teaching. Moreover, still to be examined is the length and stability of the improvement that was evident in the students after their participation in the pilot.

To conclude, we would like to quote a small excerpt from an interview with one of our educators, i.e. her answer to our question if she will go back to the old way of teaching:

'– Will you go back to the old way of teaching after all this?'

'– I don't think I will go back to the old way, I won't. I can do the texts of the book too, even those I could enhance, I could do them in a different way, that's what I mean. I could use those texts also, to do other units, to work differently, first of all it's so much more, to be honest, much more comfortable, more relaxed to work in the old way. It is a bit tiring with the new one. It is very difficult.'

A question that still remains is whether all this effort put for so many years will be a fragmentary, self-contained, one off enterprise, or it will be utilized creatively from those who happen to be responsible for the planning of educational policy for the schools of Thrace, but, also, of the entire country.

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