

Bilingual Infants and Their Treatment in the Greek Kindergarten



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Abstract The integration of immigrant children into the education systems of various countries is closely related to the education policies for immigrants and the general principles underlying the educational, social, economic and cultural context of each country. From this starting point, we explore the linguistic background of immigrant children entering the Greek kindergarten and the methods and practices adopted by their teachers, so that these children can be assisted with school and social integration. The research data was collected using a questionnaire with open and closed questions which was distributed to kindergarten teachers. Analysis of the data provided important information on the linguistic behavior of bilingual infants throughout a school year as well as on the applicable relevant practices regarding the linguistic integration of these children into the Greek education system.

Keywords Bilingual infants · Greek language · Immigrant children · Early childhood education · Teachers' perceptions · Linguistic integration

1 Introduction

In the context of contemporary immigration, governments aim for the integration of the children of immigrants into the mainstream education system. The main parameter for the successful educational and social integration of bilingual children, i.e. those who experience bilingual and bicultural socialization (Tsokalidou 2005:39), is the mastering of the dominant language of the country in which their families settled, a prerequisite for these children's favorable school performance (August et al. 2005; Goldenberg et al. 2006; Chlapana et al. 2012). For this reason, governments have adopted several educational policies closely connected to the educational, social, economic and cultural principles of each country.

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On a theoretical level, these policies range between “the hypothesis of deficiency” and “the hypothesis of diversity” (Damanakis 1997:77–78). According to the “hypothesis of deficiency”, compensatory educational policies of assimilation are recorded in which the linguistic and cultural background of bilingual students in the public school is considered to constitute “a problem” in the acquisition of the dominant language and culture (Markou 2004: 218–223). The “hypothesis of diversity” is recorded in intercultural educational policies in the public school, and the recognition of the linguistic and cultural otherness is considered a component of education for all pupils. Indeed, bilingual children’s first language is considered significant for the acquisition of the dominant language and generally for their satisfactory school progress (Tsioumis 2003; Toratori and Masali 2006; Stravakou and Hatzidimou 2006; Pearson 2002).

However, even in countries in which the management of the immigrant children’s background is closer to the hypothesis of deficiency, the transition of educational policy into educational practice by educators varies. This means that the method each educator chooses to help immigrant children in the acquisition of the dominant language is influenced by the sociolinguistic context in which the educators formulate their opinion about the role that the students’ first language plays in the educational process (Young 2011:136).

In Greece, preparatory classes for migrant students (Ministerial Decision No F.10/20/G1/708/7-9-1999, Government Gazette FEK 1789, issue B’) operate in primary school, but not in kindergarten. Therefore, bilingual kindergarten children enter mainstream kindergarten classes, which are the first compulsory level of education in Greece. Thus, kindergarten teachers are the first to be responsible for students’ integration into Greek school. The practices which kindergarten teachers adopt to support bilingual children are the focus of our investigation in this chapter.

2 School Language Learning Context

Bilingual children enter the Greek school system with a substantial variety of starting points, not only compared to native students but also amongst themselves. The main goal of school is supposed to be the development of operational skills and qualifications, which will help all children to integrate successfully in the school and the society. Therefore school, which is considered a social good by all citizens, *“acts by definition as a considerable homogenizer; not so much in the sense of removing all cultural codes, except for the school code, but in the sense of being the composition of a general and unified cultural code which includes the national language”* (Gotovos 2002: 39).

This ‘unified cultural code’, which the school must convey to all students to overcome the inequality of their starting points, includes one particular dimension of the Greek language, i.e. the “academic” dimension. The academic form of the language, which is the “language of the school” – from the text book language to the means of instruction in all school subjects – demands high order intellectual skills

in order for them to understand and produce a composite linguistic and intellectual oral and written language (Skourtou 2011:110). It is a form of language, which is in fact learned in the context of a coordinated and structured learning process, as it is directly linked to the cognitive and intellectual cultivation and the development of the individual. This is the difference between the “academic” and “conversational” form of the language, which we can characterize as the “language of recess”, because it refers to face to face conversation which uses simple grammatical and syntactic structures and speech without specific cognitive and intellectual requirements supplemented by auxiliary communication support (Cummins 2005:104–105). According to the studies by Cummins (2005), Collier (1987 in Cummins 2005:110–116), bilingual students master the conversational form of a second language to a level which is similar to their native speaker peers in a short time (1–2 years); however, in order to master the academic form, they need a much longer period (i.e. 5 years or more) of systematic development of academic language proficiency in all academic disciplines. This point is crucial for the language development of bilingual children as often the acquisition of simple communication skills is perceived by teachers as an acquisition of academic skills, resulting in children’s poor performance, which is attributable to other factors and not to incomplete linguistic development (Cummins 1999: 94, 2005:101). Therefore, the development of academic language in bilingual students should be a key goal of education (Valdes 2004; Stritikus and Varghese 2007).

According to Cummins (1999: 103), there are two factors which should be characteristic of teaching to assist students in the acquisition of the academic form of language: (a) intellectual challenge and (b) contextual support. On the one hand, the intellectual challenge in teaching is what motivates students to master knowledge. Otherwise, they remain stagnant, both cognitively and linguistically. On the other hand, contextual support gives students the necessary means to meet the intellectual challenges of the new knowledge and to master it. In summary, in order for students to be able to master, not only the language of school itself successfully, but also to develop cognitively, they must be intellectually challenged and at the same time given the appropriate contextual support known as “scaffolding” (Stritikus and Varghese 2007).

The shaping of a positive educational climate in the classroom is an essential factor in promoting social and school integration and language development (Trilianos 2013) and even more so, for those from diverse cultural backgrounds (Tsioumis 2003; Douvli 2004). In this context, mixed activity groups are formed. In these groups projects are assigned, while recognizing the different cultural backgrounds and while trying to give strong messages to students about the value of the development of their mother tongue and strengthening the interaction between them (Cummins 1999: 199). In a rich stimulating school environment, the teacher encourages students to communicate with each other and with him/her, not only in matters of everyday school life, but also to develop dialogues with the vocabulary in the subject of the day and to look for information, etc. (Schleppegrell et al. 2004).

3 Research Methodology

Presented below is a small section of a broader research project whose target is to examine the views and practices of kindergarten teachers in Greece for the management of ethno-cultural diversity in their classes. In this research, questionnaires with closed and open-ended questions were used as tools to explore the support of bilingual kindergarten children in their acquisition/learning of the Greek language among other issues. The answers given to the closed questions were processed with the SPSS statistical package and those of the open-ended questions with the content analysis method (Neuendorf 2002), whereby the relative kindergarten teachers' opinions were ranked into thematic categories and subcategories.

The analysis provided information about:

- The representations which the teachers have concerning the linguistic behavior of bilingual infants, namely the degree of use of Greek in various communicative situations and with different speakers at the beginning and the end of the school year, and
- The pedagogical - didactic methods and practices adopted by the teachers to support bilingual children in learning Greek.

Through the analysis of the data obtained, we will attempt to show how the bicultural/ bilingual background of the children affects their role in kindergarten.

3.1 *Sample*

The survey population consists of all kindergarten teachers employed in the 2011–2012 school year in public kindergartens on the island of Crete. Our research sample is random and is composed of 105 kindergarten teachers from different prefectures.

Our sample is split into three age groups: 23–34 years (29%), 35–44 years (32%), 45 years and over (36%). We could say that all age groups are represented to an almost equal degree. As for years of service, half of the teachers have up to 10 years of experience: 1–10 years (47%), 11–20 years (24%) and 21 years and over (27%).

In addition, in a question given to the teachers on how informed they were on diversity management issues, only 26% said they had attended relevant courses at university level and only 28% said they had attended relevant seminars.

Regarding the percentage of immigrant students in the classes, the majority of teachers (83%) stated that more than 25% of students in their class are of immigrant background. The language spoken by bilingual students indicating their origin are Albanian, (66%), Bulgarian (19%) and in much smaller percentages, languages of the Middle East, Slavic and Western European languages, Russian and Hindi.

4 Research Findings

4.1 The Use of Greek Only by Bilingual Kindergarten Students

Of particular interest was (a) the investigation of the language which, according to the teachers' opinions and observations, the immigrant students used to communicate in various situations, and (b) the investigation of the change in the language of communication from the beginning to the end of the school year. Table 1 presents the teachers' answers regarding the use of Greek only by immigrant students various communication situations at the beginning and at the end of the school year.

In the communication situations described above (Table 1), we observe that according to the teachers, these children use Greek only to communicate with the above-mentioned speakers much more at the end of the school year than at the beginning. It is characteristic that all the differences in the frequency of Greek usage between these two-time limits are statistically significant for all communication situations. It is worth noting that the use of statistical criteria χ^2 and Phi also revealed that there is a high affinity ratio between the teachers who detected the use of Greek at the beginning and those who detected it at the end of the school year. This means that the teachers find that, children who speak it at the beginning continue to do so at the end, evidence which shows that the school environment strengthens the capacity of bilingual students to use Greek.

A more careful look at Table 1, identifies some expected differences in the use of Greek in relation to the person with whom the bilingual students communicate. Although the teachers largely state that at the end of the school year bilingual students use only Greek, both with teachers and their native peers in various situations, there is also a large proportion (about 50%) of teachers who say that the bilingual students still do not use Greek only with their fellow classmates at the end of the school year. This means that the bilingual pupils use Greek alongside their first

Table 1 Teachers' observations regarding the use of Greek by bilingual students in various communication situations in kindergarten at the beginning and at the end of the school year

| Communication Situations | Beginning of school year | | End of school year | | χ^2 |
|--|--------------------------|------|--------------------|------|----------|
| | N | % | N | % | |
| (a) With the kindergarten teachers in organized activities | 52 | 53,6 | 80 | 82,5 | 55,82*** |
| (b) With local peers in organized activities | 51 | 52,6 | 75 | 77,3 | 33,86*** |
| (c) With fellow peers in organized activities | 41 | 42,3 | 55 | 56,7 | 8,23** |
| (d) with the kindergarten teachers in the break and free in activities | 61 | 62,9 | 82 | 84,5 | 34,78*** |
| (e) with local peers in the break and in free activities | 50 | 51,5 | 78 | 80,4 | 51,31*** |
| (f) with fellow peers in the break and in free activities | 32 | 33,0 | 49 | 50,5 | 11,92*** |
| (g) with their parents at school | 16 | 16,5 | 26 | 26,8 | 5,25* |

*p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001 μ ε df(1)

language with their fellow peers. This finding, i.e. the non-exclusive use of Greek in the school environment, appears to an even greater extent when bilingual students communicate with their parents.

4.2 *Kindergarten Teachers' Actions to Support Bilingual Students in Learning Greek*

Kindergarten teachers were asked to answer an open-ended question about the actions undertaken to support bilingual pupils in the acquisition of Greek. Table 2 presents references drawn from the responses, categorized according to the content analysis method.

Out of the total number of teachers, 14% (15 teachers) did not reply to the question regarding the effects of teacher actions designed to help support children learn Greek.

From the replies, 9 teachers consider that it is unnecessary for the teacher to take any particular action as they believe that the bilingual students' participation in the class and their interaction with other infants is sufficient to master Greek. They stated that *"auditory stimuli in the class and the daily contact of these children with Greek children helped them achieve rapid knowledge of the Greek language"* (T7)¹ and that *"children learn Greek easily and it does not require any special effort"* (T23).

The remaining 81 teachers seem to have the opposite view and cite some specific actions which the teacher is obliged to take. These actions are emotional, social and pedagogical.

Table 2 Kindergarten teachers' actions to assist bilingual infants to learn Greek to a satisfactory level depending on their age

| Kindergarten teachers' actions | Number of references |
|--|----------------------|
| A. no action | 9 references |
| B. Actions with emotional and social targeting | |
| Boosting the confidence of bilingual pupils | 17 references |
| Encouragement for social engagement | 13 references |
| Cooperation of all children | 12 references |
| Exhortation and incentive towards the indigenous population to accept the bilingual pupils | 10 references |
| Actions with intercultural and bilingual targeting | 25 references |
| C. Actions with pedagogical and didactic targeting | |
| Teaching methodology | 61 references |
| Techniques in communication achievement, everyday language expressions and grammar and syntactic correctness | 51 references |

¹T7 means the kindergarten teacher's questionnaire reference, number 7.

In the first category, teachers refer more specifically to actions which target the emotional and social empowerment of the bilingual children themselves, seeking to create an inclusive climate of trust and confidence, especially for the initial period of the child's attendance. In this context, some teachers stated that they addressed the bilingual children directly, boosting their self-confidence, encouraging them to become socially involved with their peers and suggest: "*first the teacher must make them feel comfortable*" (T26), "*to reward effort and have unlimited patience!*" (T58), "*encourage them to speak Greek as much as possible and reward them*" (T64).

To promote the social integration of bilingual students into the class, some teachers felt the need to encourage bilingual and native students to collaborate in various activities: "*to promote group activities where Greek children engage with immigrant children ensuring positive results both on a relationship and friendship level as well as a linguistic level*" (T93).

Additionally, some other teachers reported that they immediately and directly address the native school population using exhortation and inducement verbs to achieve the acceptance of bilingual students by their peers. They typically said: "*ask the native students to 'teach' the foreign students Greek*" (T39), "*to convince the children to accept the foreign children into their team in their games*" (T10).

We incorporate the teachers' statements related to actions with intercultural and bilingual targeting into the actions aimed at social and emotional stimulation. In such a context they say: "*Initially I think that a kindergarten teacher needs to learn a few words of the bilingual children's mother tongue, in this way, encouraging their positive self-image*" (T83) "*In the first three months using cultivation practices of speaking, simple stories and songs common to many languages, we find what people have in common*" (T48), "*to enrich the classroom with elements of their own culture, words in their own language for example 'good morning', 'good afternoon'*" (T105) "*to ask them how they say the same word in their language*" (T9). It is about actions that invest in the initial smooth integration of bilingual students into the kindergarten.

Teachers with intercultural and bilingual educational knowledge such as T97, who states that the teacher must "*encourage the parents of foreign students to read stories and speak to them in their mother tongue*" are rare.

The second category includes statements that show teachers progress to educational and instructive practices targeting either the language material or teaching styles and techniques. On the one hand there are references to teaching methodology such as "*individualized instruction*" (T25) "*active-experiential participation in all activities*" (T37) or related to means of instruction or work methods such as "*short and easy fairy tales*" (T57) "*language games*" (T81) "*songs*" (T60) "*role play, pantomime*" (T75), "*puppet theatre*" (T47) etc. On the other hand, teachers refer to techniques that aim to achieve both communication and the learning of everyday Greek language. They suggest "*slow and clear use of Greek*" (25 references), "*the use of visual material*" (15 references), "*expressions / body movements*" (T68), "*short sentences*" (T22), "*repetition*" (T6), "*short commands*" (T60) and also seek grammar and syntactic correctness stating that "*we work indirectly on the syntax and we insist on the correct use of articles and suffixes*" (T48).

5 Discussion

While investigating the linguistic behavior of bilingual children it is worth noting that there seems to be no serious linguistic communication problem between native and bilingual students throughout the year (Zisimopoulou and Koutroumpa 2006). The discovery that children who speak Greek at the beginning of the school year increase their use throughout the year is positive and to be expected, as it shows that attendance at kindergarten assists bilingual children to gradually master Greek, the knowledge of which is a basic requirement for communication at school, their academic progress and their integration into Greek society. Therefore, the use of the dominant language with the teacher and the native peers increases and to a greater extent towards the end of the school year, apparently because it is perceived by the students that this is the only language in which they can communicate. So, if they have achieved a certain degree of competence they already use it (Hammer et al. 2009).

At the same time, it is evident that kindergarten leaves room for the use of the immigrant children's mother tongues. As shown in the teachers' comments, throughout the year bilingual students communicate in their native language as well as in Greek, which is also supported by other studies (Triarhi-Herrmann 2006). The fact that school allows bilingual students to communicate in their mother tongue, is considered both a very important condition for the formation of a sense of recognition and acceptance of the child in the school context (social dimension) and also as a facilitator in learning the mainstream language (linguistic dimension) (Tsioumis 2003; Triarhi-Herrmann 2006). The hypotheses of "common underlying proficiency" and "interdependence of languages" by Cummins (1999, 2005) and the "model of biliteracy continua" by Hornberger (1989, 2003 in Skourtu 2011:78), highlight the correlation between the first language and the learning of the second and the impact of bilingualism on the cognitive and mental development of the individual.

In addition, the fact that bilingual children choose to use their native language as an alternative to Greek (in a monolingual environment) does not indicate that they do it out of ignorance of Greek, as they communicate in Greek with native speakers. On the contrary, it means that the children feel comfortable disclosing their identity, which they consider a dynamic synthesis of linguistic and cultural elements of the community of origin and the dominant community (Skourtu 2011: 62–63). This is because bilingual children do not perceive the two linguistic and cultural systems within which they operate as being in opposition or competition - as school may perceive the different linguistic and cultural backgrounds of bilingual children - but rather as supplementary and synthetic. When conditions allow, this complementarity and composition is expressed by the children through the alternation of linguistic and cultural codes, a phenomenon which emerges in other studies carried out on the linguistic behavior of bilingual infants in infant classes (De Houwer 2007; Hatzidaki and Sitareniou 2009; Chlapana et al. 2012).

Regarding communication situations, we could argue that both conversational communication in Greek, which dominates recess and free activities, and academic

communication, cultivated mainly in organized activities, develop proportionally throughout the school year. It was important therefore, to investigate the actions which teachers use to support bilingual students' communication in Greek.

It seems that teachers are mainly motivated by their experience and by their general pedagogical knowledge. Most of them have neither attended special classes nor training courses for bilingual and intercultural education. As an important parameter, teachers highlight the emotional and social empowerment of bilingual students, by encouraging their active participation in the education and general schooling process and their interaction with other children. Besides, it has been highlighted in related studies that kindergarten teachers believe that the coexistence of immigrant and Greek students fosters the learning process and especially the socialization of immigrant students (Govaris and Mpatsouta 2014). In our research, there are frequent comments such as, "*through interaction (bilingual infants) learn Greek easily*" (T8), making even many teachers' own direct involvement unnecessary.

This view is consistent with many reports in the literature which mention the influence of meaningful interaction activities with peers on learning a second language (Edwards 2009:92–96) and practice the language in an indirect and natural way (Norden 2001).

However, the actions of kindergarten teachers with intercultural and bilingual targeting seem to be aimed primarily at the emotional stimulation of bilingual children, their acceptance by other students and to help them make a smoother transition from the family to the school environment (Fthenakis 1998). The majority of teachers' references puts no emphasis on actions that consciously and methodically serve didactic implementation targets of the overall linguistic and cultural background of bilingual students, not in order to cultivate the first language of these students, but to help them to a faster and more effective learning of the academic form of Greek (Skourtou 2011:94).

The majority of the actions which, we could say, are within the "tourist approach" (Vandenbroeck 2004:127–130; Derman-Sparks 1989), are distinguished by fragmentation and are usually limited to the first period of kindergarten attendance. It is a framework of actions for the initial integration of bilingual students into the infant classes which is especially useful, but would be of great value to all children, not only the bilingual ones, if the target was the development of "multilingual/plurilingual and intercultural competence" (Cavalli et al. 2009:8).

Interpreting Table 2 as a whole, one finds that kindergarten teachers undertake, to a great extent, pedagogical and teaching endeavors to assist bilingual children learn Greek and resort to a number of efforts ranging from social support to methodological - didactic support for the conquest of the dominant language. However, by focusing more on the practices adopted, there is fragmentation, an absence of an organized program, an effort to manage their bilingual and bicultural students empirically, using anything heard of or read, or through experimentation, often verbalizing how uncertain they are about their actions: "*Unfortunately I have still not managed to find the way I can really help these children. Empirically I urge them to make sentences, to speak in full sentences, name objects, leave them time to be able to find the words to express themselves and urge them to watch TV (children's programs) in Greek*" (T89).

6 Conclusions

Summing up our findings, we would say the following:

Kindergarten teachers find that the degree of use of Greek by bilingual infants, from the beginning to the end of the school year, increases in all communication situations investigated, especially when Greek speaking peers are involved. At the same time, the opportunity to use their mother tongue with their compatriots is not lost, meaning that kindergarten is a place that leaves room for the use of the infants' mother tongues as well.

The vast majority of kindergarten teachers, in order to help the bilingual children learn Greek, develop actions which fall into two main groups: (a) those designed to promote better social integration and emotional acceptance in kindergarten and society and (b) those which include education and teaching practices which assist in the mastering and use of Greek. Both actions are based on the personal sensitivity, information, knowledge and inspiration of the teacher and do not constitute a comprehensive, targeted and systematic framework or intervention program for the specific target.

The findings of our research, despite coinciding with other similar studies, are subject to some restrictions:

The participants in our study came from one geographical region of Greece and had specific characteristics in terms of their teaching experience and the knowledge of Intercultural Pedagogy they had acquired from studies and training. A group of kindergarten teachers with different characteristics with respect to the above, may lead to different research results.

The research tool used in this study was a questionnaire with closed and open-ended questions. Perhaps the use of other methodological tools such as interview, observation and/or a diary would lead to different classifications of the teachers' responses and to different documentation of the use of Greek.

From the research findings, we can formulate some research and pedagogical proposals. On a research level, we consider that the conduct of such studies with a larger number of kindergarten teachers who serve throughout the country is necessary. Exploring the issue of the use of Greek by bilingual infants from the point of view of other population groups (e.g. parents, native and bilingual children) will provide important information on the subject.

On a pedagogical level, we consider that the investigation highlighted the lack of central planning to strengthen the mastering and use of Greek by the bilingual kindergarten children. The need for the effective training of kindergarten teachers in the management of bilingual student populations and their families, which is a basic obligation of the State and the teachers' personal responsibility, is also highlighted. Teachers need to create a positive educational environment in the school, to use learner-centered approaches, rich stimuli, modified teaching and "challenge" students to participate in the "academic" language debate (Schleppegrell et al. 2004). The writing and publication, by the Ministry of Education, of a relevant guide with suggestions for teaching applications and guidelines for selecting suitable language

materials in kindergartens with bilingual students, could constitute strong support for teachers in addressing relevant issues.

What we should certainly bear in mind is, that the effective training of bilingual students requires a broader supportive educational and social environment (Stritikus and Varghese 2007) and is not an approach in itself, but relies on broader approaches such as the institutional management of migrants, the empowering of students etc. (Cahnmann and Varghese 2006).

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