Bilingual children attending state primary schools: Is Cyprus ready for multicultural education?

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Abstract

The student population in the primary schools of the Greek-Cypriot community has for many years been homogenous, consisting nearly exclusively of Greek Orthodox children of Greek origin. During the last decade a noticeable increase has been observed in the number of other-language speaking children or bilingual children attending primary schools in Cyprus, but research on these children is very limited. The purpose of the present study is to provide island-wide information regarding the number of bilingual children attending state schools, their ethnic background, the languages spoken at home and their school performance. Furthermore, the study examines teachers’ views on the behaviour of these children as well as their attitudes towards bilingualism and multicultural education in Cyprus.

Keywords: bilingualism, multilingualism, attitudes, school performance, Cyprus

1. Introduction and literature review

Several communities have been co-existing on the island of Cyprus for many years; these are the Greek Cypriots who constitute the majority of the population (about 82%), the Turkish Cypriots, the Maronites, the Armenian and the Latin (the members of the last three communities do not exceed 4,000). The student population in the primary schools of the Greek-Cypriot community has been pretty homogenous for the last few centuries, consisting nearly exclusively of Greek Orthodox children of Greek origin. However, during the last decade or so a noticeable increase has been observed in the number of other-language
speaking children (αλλόγλωσσον) or bilingual children (διγλωσσον) attending primary state schools. These are mainly children of repatriated Cypriots, Greeks of Pontic origin, formerly citizens of USSR, and foreign workers who have settled on the island recently.

As far as it can be ascertained, very few studies have dealt with the phenomenon of bilingualism in Cyprus. With the exception of Papapavlou (1999) who examined the academic performance of bilingual children in one specific school in Larnaca, there is no information on the number of bilingual or other-language speaking children attending state schools, their national and ethnic background, the languages they speak at home and their performance at school. Furthermore, there is no published systematic research on (a) teachers’ views concerning the status and behaviour of these children in the classroom, and (b) their attitudes toward bilingualism, multicultural education and the positive or negative effects that this phenomenon may have on the Cypriot society. For these reasons, a pan-Cyprian survey was carried out with the support of the Ministry of Education and Culture aiming to: (a) examine the number of other-language speaking children attending state primary schools throughout Cyprus, (b) identify their linguistic and ethnic background, (c) assess their school performance, (d) investigate their educational needs, linguistic difficulties and social problems, and (e) examine teachers’ views on the behaviour of these children and the attitudes teachers hold towards bilingualism and multiculturalism in Cyprus. Such an investigation is of vital importance for several reasons: (a) to obtain accurate demographic information about these children, (b) to gain knowledge that can be useful for addressing the problems that are possibly arising from this situation and (c) to determine the educational policy that would be appropriate and beneficial for this group of children. Since Cyprus’ accession to the EU is now a reality, this policy should be in line with multicultural education that rests at the core of European education.

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1 The Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture, out of sensitivity towards the issue of bilingualism, rather than using the term “foreign-language speakers” (ξενόγλωσσον) in various documents, uses the term “other-language speakers” (αλλόγλωσσον) and defines the latter as speakers of one or more languages other than Greek as their mother tongue.

2 Dr. M. Roussou and Elena Hatzigianni-Yi-Siou, officials from the Ministry of Education and Culture, prepared a study entitled “Διασπολισμική Αγωγή και Εκπαίδευση στην Κύπρο - ΔΙΑ.ΕΚ” (Multiculturalism and Education in Cyprus, 2001) which covers the following issues: (a) the basic principles and aims of intercultural education (b) the educational system in Greece and Cyprus with respect to DI.A.EK and (c) suggestions and applications of DI.A.EK in the educational system of Cyprus. Also this study includes some statistical information on the number of “other-language speakers” (αλλόγλωσσον) attending primary education.
The literature review on bilingualism and multicultural education is very extensive with thousands of books and articles covering this subject (Bloomfield 1933, Grosjean 1982, Hakuta 1986, Hamers and Blanc 1989, Hoffmann 1991, Romaine 1995, Cummins 1996, 2000, Baker, 2000, 2001). To provide a complete review of bilingualism and the various aspects of multicultural education in this paper is almost impossible. Also, providing a precise definition of bilingualism would not be attempted as this phenomenon is multi-dimensional and is affected by various factors within the individual and the environment in which he/she lives. The multitudes of definitions that appear in various studies are usually characterised by lack of functional accuracy and precision. For example, Baetens-Beardsmore (1982) reported some thirty-five definitions of bilingualism but without presenting a definition that is considered to be the most accurate or precise.

2. The study

For the purposes of the study, 3,000 questionnaires were distributed to all the primary schools of Cyprus in January of the academic year 1999/2000. The questionnaires included instructions for completion and were accompanied by a letter from the Director of Primary Education explaining the aims of the study, extolling its importance and urging teachers to complete and return the questionnaires to the principal investigator as soon as possible.

The questionnaire consisted of three parts; the first part elicited information about the teachers, such as their place of origin, qualifications, teaching experience etc. and about the bilingual children attending their classes (such as their place of origin, languages spoken at home etc.). The second part consisted of ten Likert-scale statements eliciting teachers’ views on students’ behaviour in the classroom and their academic performance in certain subjects. Likewise, the third part examined teachers’ attitudes towards the presence of bilingual children in their classes and the resulting effects that this growing phenomenon may have on the Cypriot society. The completed questionnaires were returned by April 2000, and the obtained data were codified and analysed statistically.

3. Results

The results are presented in Parts A and B. Part A presents the overall analysis of bilingual students and teachers and Part B the teachers’ views, perceptions and attitudes.
3.1 Part A: Sample analysis of bilingual students and teachers

3.1.1 Teachers

The questionnaires were completed by 965 teachers who had bilingual students attending their classes. The teachers were 80% female and 20% male. Furthermore, 595 teachers worked in urban schools while 370 in rural schools. Almost all of them (99%) were Greek Cypriot, 70% had up to 15 years of teaching experience and a relatively small percentage (9%) held post-graduate degrees. About one third of the teachers (N=335, 35%) came from Nicosia, another one third (N=290, 30%) from Limassol, one tenth (N=109, 11%) from Paphos, while the remaining teachers came from other districts.

3.1.2 Number of schools and bilingual students

There was an extremely high rate of participation as 97% of the primary schools in Cyprus took part in the study. According to the teachers’ responses, there were 2,411 bilingual children in the various primary schools throughout Cyprus in the year 2000. From the 2,411 bilingual students, 1,240 were boys and 1,171 were girls.

3.1.3 Ages of students

The sample of children is distributed nearly equally as far as age is concerned: 30% are aged 6-7, 31% are aged 8-9, 31% are aged 10-11, and 8% are aged 12-13. The majority of children (75%) had attended the first grade when they first went to school. A lower percentage (around 8% and 2%, respectively) attended the second and sixth grade, respectively, when they first registered. Most of the children in the sample (70%) had attended school from 1 to 3 years. The percentages for grades A, B and C were 27%, 24% and 19%, respectively. Each class had a small number of bilingual students; in 92% of the cases the number ranged from 1 to 5 students per class while in only two instances the number exceeded 20 students.

3.1.4 Countries of origin and percentage of students per district

The teachers reported that the bilingual children came from ninety-six (96) different countries. The most frequently reported countries were: Georgia, Russia, Great Britain and Romania. The districts of Nicosia and Limassol had the highest percentage in bilingual children (29% and 27%, respectively), followed by Paphos with 19%, Larnaca with 18% and Famagusta with 7%.
3.1.5 Number of languages spoken

A large number of students, 1,984 (82%), speak another language besides their home language and Greek, 232 students (9.6%) speak a fourth language, while 14 children (0.6%) speak more than four languages.

3.1.6 Variety of languages

Table 1 below shows the languages spoken by the majority of the children. The most ‘popular’ language is English followed by Russian. In addition, many students speak Bulgarian and Romanian, followed by various other languages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>892</td>
<td>37.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>745</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgarian</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romanian</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finnish</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgian idiom</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Languages</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>2411</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of students who speak English (31%) are located in Limassol, followed by 25% in Nicosia, 19% in Larnaca, 15% in Paphos, and 10% in Famagusta. Table 2 provides a summary of the languages spoken by the bilingual children in each of the five districts.
Table 2. Languages per district

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Nicosia</th>
<th>Limassol</th>
<th>Larnaca</th>
<th>Famagusta</th>
<th>Paphos</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>892</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>745</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgarian</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romanian</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabian</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finnish</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgian idiom</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Languages</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.1.7 Evaluation of academic performance

Teachers were asked to evaluate the performance of bilingual children in the various subjects (such as Greek, Maths, Science) studied at school by using a scale from 1 to 5. The performance of only 2,374 out of the 2,411 bilingual children was evaluated (as 37 cases are missing). The average performance on this scale was 3.13 with a standard deviation of 1.18. Table 3 shows the overall performance of the bilingual students according to the five-point scale.

Table 3. Overall performance of bilingual students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of performance</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
<th>Valid Percentage (%)</th>
<th>Total Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Very low</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Low</td>
<td>406</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>28.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Medium</td>
<td>809</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>62.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. High</td>
<td>571</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>86.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Very high</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2374</td>
<td>98.5</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the basis of teachers’ evaluations (as presented in Table 3), it could be argued that the performance of the bilingual children is rather balanced; it follows a normal distribution and could be characterized as satisfactory. A comparison of school performance between the bilingual and monolingual children could not be drawn due to the lack of parallel data. Nevertheless, bilingual children’s level of school performance is no cause for alarm.
3.1.8 Number of bilingual students per school per district

Due to space limitations, the number of bilingual children in each school in the five districts of Cyprus will not be presented here (this information can be made available from the author).

3.2. Part B: Teachers’ views, perceptions and attitudes

This part of the survey (a) investigates teachers’ views with respect to the behaviour and performance of bilingual students in class, and (b) examines the attitudes that teachers hold towards bilingual children, the possible effects that the knowledge of two or more languages may have on these children and the overall impact that bilingualism may have on the Cypriot society as a whole. As previously stated, 965 teachers completed the questionnaires (80% female and 20% male).

3.2.1 Views and attitudes towards bilingual students

(This refers to part C of the questionnaire which was based on the following scale: 5-never, 4- hardly ever, 3- rarely, 2- almost always 1-always).

The following are teachers’ answers on the ten issues they were asked to evaluate.

(a) Use of the Greek language in class (I discourage bilingual children from using any other language besides Greek in class).

Teachers’ views vary as far as the use of another language in class other than Greek is concerned. About one out of two teachers (48%) reported that they hardly ever or never discourage children from using another language in class, 21% mentioned that this rarely occurs, while 28% reported that they always or nearly always insist on the use of Greek in class.

(b) Setting up special classes (Setting up special classes for bilingual children is necessary for meeting their needs).

About one out of three teachers (28%) support the need for special classes, 21% consider that special classes will never or hardly ever be necessary, while 51% of the sample maintain that, at some point, special classes should be arranged.

(c) Special training (whether teaching bilingual children requires special training).

Views vary for the necessity of special training for those teaching bilingual students: 28% support that special training is always or nearly always necessary,
47% state that special training is sometimes necessary, while 25% state that such training will never or hardly ever be necessary.

(d) Special teaching material *(whether effective teaching of bilingual children requires special instructional material).*

With respect to the issue of whether special instructional material is essential for teaching, responses concentrate towards one end of the scale: 50% of the teachers state that this will always or nearly always be necessary, 36% support that it is sometimes necessary and only 13% hold that it will never or hardly ever be necessary.

(e) Teachers’ expectations *(I have limited expectations of bilingual students as far as their school performance is concerned).*

Regarding teachers’ expectations of bilingual children, a high percentage of teachers (60%) have reported that never or hardly ever are their expectations of bilingual students limited in terms of performance. Only 8.6% have stated that they always or nearly always differentiate their requirements with respect to this particular group of students.

(f) Providing additional assistance *(I assist these children in out-of-class periods for the preparation of their homework).*

With respect to assisting bilingual children out-of-class, one out of two teachers (52%) state that they sometimes assist children with their homework, while the remaining 49% spreads over the two ends of the scale: 23% report that they never or hardly ever operate in this way, and 26% confirm the opposite, i.e. that they always or nearly always take advantage of that time to provide assistance to bilingual children.

(g) Providing additional time *(I assist these children by providing extra time during the lesson for the preparation of their homework).*

The percentages concerning the provision of extra time during lessons for the completion of students’ homework are on an equal level: 36% of the teachers always or nearly always operate in this way, 44% sometimes provide extra time, and 20% never or hardly ever devote more time for bilingual students to complete their homework.

(h) Interpersonal relations *(I have noticed that bilingual children seek to make friends with other children).*

The overwhelming majority of teachers (74%) report that the bilingual children are always willing to become friends with the other children.
(i) Willingness to cooperate (I have noticed that bilingual children are less willing to cooperate with me during the lesson).

Teachers' views as to whether bilingual children are willing to cooperate with them also vary. Only 7% of the teachers state that this is always or nearly always the case. In their majority (73%), teachers have stated that the willingness of bilingual children to cooperate is never or hardly ever low.

(j) Parental interest (I have noticed that the parents of bilingual children show an interest in their children's school performance).

With respect to the parents of bilingual children, 50% of the teachers hold that the parents of bilingual children always or nearly always show an interest in their children's performance, 32% state that the interest of parents is sometimes apparent and 18% report that there is never or hardly ever interest on the parents' part.

3.2.2 Views and attitudes towards bilingualism and its effects on the Cypriot society

(This refers to part D of the questionnaire, which was based on the following scale: 5- strongly agree, 4-agree, 3-uncertain, 2-disagree, 1-strongly disagree).

(a) Responsibility for the enhancement and maintenance of the home language (The teaching and enhancement of the home language is strictly an issue of the family and should not be the schools' concern).

Teachers' views vary with respect to their share of responsibility towards developing the language spoken by bilingual children in their family environment. While 37% of the teachers agree that the teaching and development of the home language is purely a family issue and should not be the responsibility of the school, 44% disagree and 18% are uncertain about the validity of the statement.

(b) Difficulties encountered in the use of the Greek language (Bilingual children will always face serious difficulties in using the Greek language).

Teachers' views on the difficulties bilingual children will face in the use of the Greek language tend to fluctuate: 57% disagree with this statement, 25% are uncertain, while the remaining 18% agree.

(c) Problems encountered in the acquisition and development of the Greek language (The acquisition and development of Greek in young children is not hindered by the use of a second or a foreign language).

Almost half (44%) of the teachers disagree with this view. The percentages
of teachers who are either uncertain or agree are nearly on the same fairly high level (29% and 27%, respectively).

(d) Possible negative effects of bilingualism (Acquiring two languages at the same time can cause confusion in children’s thinking).

About 47% of the teachers disagree with this view. However, a fairly high percentage (31%) appear uncertain of the validity of this statement and 22% indicate their agreement with this view.

(e) Problems of national identity (Bilingual children of mixed families [where one parent is a Cypriot] as well as children with foreign parents are likely to face problems of national identity).

Questions 5 and 6 deal with the issue of whether bilingual children of foreign parents or mixed families are likely to face problems of national identity. In both questions a high percentage of teachers (41% and 43%, respectively) have expressed their uncertainty about the validity of these statements, while another 34% and 25%, respectively, disagree with the view that the children of mixed families or foreign parents face problems of this kind.

(f) National consciousness and identity (Bilingual children are unable to develop national consciousness due to their multicultural nature).

A high percentage of teachers (40%) express their uncertainty about whether it is easy for bilingual children to develop a national consciousness due to their multicultural origins. The percentage of teachers who disagree reaches the same level (40%), while 20% indicate their agreement with this view.

(g) Radical transformation of the Cypriot culture (The presence of bilingual children is likely to bring about radical alterations in the Cypriot society).

Over half (52%) of the teachers disagree. One out of four teachers (25%) agree with this statement, while an almost equal number (23%) are not sure.

(h) Effects on the academic performance of the other children (The presence of bilingual children constitutes a restrictive factor with respect to the academic performance of other children in class).

The majority of teachers (78%) disagree, and only 3% refrain from expressing their opinion, while about 9% agree with the statement.

(i) Being different and levels of tolerance toward others (The existence of bilingual children in the school environment helps the other children become more tolerant towards children with different cultural backgrounds).

The overwhelming majority of teachers (86%) agree. Only a mere 6% dis-
agree with the above statement, while 8% report that they are uncertain about this issue.

4. Discussion and concluding remarks

The findings of the first part of the study are mainly demographic in nature and do not need any detailed discussion. In brief, the study has shown that during the academic year 2000, 97% of the primary schools in Cyprus had more than 2,400 bilingual children from 96 different countries. The languages most frequently spoken by these children are English, Russian, Bulgarian and Romanian, with a fairly large number of these children speaking more than two languages (cf. Table 1).

In the last two parts of the study, where teachers were asked to respond to Likert-type questions, the results are fairly revealing. With respect to the practical aspects of the presence of bilingual children in primary schools, the following observations merit discussion. Firstly, half of the 965 teachers who took part in the study do not discourage bilingual children from using their home language in class with other children who share the same language. This indicates teachers' awareness of the fact that the first language can be a source of linguistic 'wealth' and should not be suppressed. In addition, half of the participants hold the view that additional training is not necessary for teaching bilingual children, nor do they support the need for setting up especially designed classes for these children. Nevertheless, they do see the need for the development of appropriate teaching material. Secondly, teachers do not appear to have fewer demands from bilingual children in terms of carrying out class activities and completing home assignments. In their majority, teachers declare that in addition to in-class hours they are ready to offer further assistance to these children for the preparation of their homework. Thirdly, the overwhelming majority of teachers report that the bilingual children are always eager to cooperate with them and that they always seek friendships with the other children. Furthermore, half of the teachers state that the parents of bilingual children show concern about their children's performance at school.

Regarding the socio-ideological aspect of bilingualism, the following can be noted. Firstly, a large part of the teachers believe that the teaching and further development of the children's mother tongue (i.e. their home language) should be a family issue. Secondly, half of the teachers believe that these children will not encounter serious difficulties in mastering the Greek language, nor do they believe that the acquisition and mastery of the Greek language is hindered by the children's home language. In addition, an equal number of teachers report
that they do not believe that learning simultaneously two languages is a source of confusion in these children's way of thinking. Consequently, one could argue that teachers' attitudes towards bilingualism do not appear to be negative. Thirdly, with respect to the issue of national identity and national consciousness, it is noteworthy that almost half of the teachers (about 40%) oppose the view that children of mixed families or of foreign parents will face problems of national identity. However, an equally high percentage of teachers appear to be uncertain with respect to the degree of difficulty bilingual children may face in developing national consciousness due to their multilingual and multicultural origins. Teachers' ambivalence regarding the acquisition of national identity and national consciousness is probably due to the lack of extensive and continuous exposure to children from multi-ethnic backgrounds that are growing alongside with the children of the dominant culture (such as in places like London, New York etc.). Fourthly, it is noteworthy that over half of the teachers disagree with the statement that the presence of bilingual children in Cyprus will bring about negative and radical changes to the Cypriot society. The teachers also express their disagreement with the view that the bilingual children who attend Cypriot schools hinder the performance of their fellow students. Equally important is the finding which shows that the overwhelming majority of teachers hold the view that the presence of bilingual children in schools helps the other children become more tolerant towards people with a different cultural background than their own. Certainly, acknowledging the positive effects that the presence of multi-ethnic children can have on the other (monolingual) children is very encouraging. It surely curtails ethnic arrogance and nationalistic pride and helps in eliminating feelings of xenophobia.

It is safe, then, to conclude that while there is a moderate concern among teachers regarding the presence of bilingual children in the Cypriot schools, in terms of the acquisition of bilingual behaviour and the development of national identity, one could say that the level of concern is rather understandable considering that the Cypriot society has been relatively isolated, secluded, and to a large extent homogenous, for many years. On the contrary, teachers' views and attitudes towards bilingualism could be characterized as positive and encouraging, provided that the Ministry of Education and Culture will continue to keep the teachers informed and enlightened on matters pertaining to bilingualism and multicultural education. At the same time, educationalists, as well as other researchers in relevant fields should continue carrying out further research on the various aspects of bilingualism and multicultural education in order to enable the concerned authorities to be better prepared for this growing pheno-
menon in Cyprus, especially now that the island is officially a full member of Multilingual and Multicultural Europe.

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References