Researching bilingualism in Greece

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Abstract

Interest in bilingual phenomena in Greece is increasing as the Greek society is moving towards multiculturalism. In this paper, we will discuss some of the issues raised in language contact phenomena overseas and we will investigate some of the main issues concerning bilingual research within the context of the Greek school. We will then move on to present some preliminary findings of a specific research project carried out during 2002 in some primary Greek schools at the area of Volos. Research in bilingualism in Greece is a prerequisite for an educational context of linguistic and cultural exchange.

Keywords: bilingualism, interculturalism, sociolinguistic profiles, language contact

1. Introduction

No society chooses to become multicultural (Clyne and Ozolins 2001: 373) and, by extension, we can say that no community or person really chooses to live between languages and cultures, a life that, more often than not, entails struggling with a mixed sense of identity, a new language and the prejudiced attitude of the host society. On the contrary, societies usually have no alternative than to accept their multiculturalism as a result of the dramatic change of their demographic composition. Thus, the influx of immigrants challenges and forces the host country to, eventually, take measures that will accommodate the new sociolinguistic reality one way or another.

In this paper, after a brief discussion of the proposed stages that multicultural societies go through on the way to accepting and making the best of
their multilingualism/multiculturalism, we will present the preliminary findings of a recent research project on bilingual primary school children carried out by a team from the University of Thessaly, under the supervision of the author. The theoretical discussion of multiculturalism is based on experience coming from the Australian context and the recent work of Clyne and Ozolins (2001). As Edwards (2001: 327) states, “while every setting is unique, its uniqueness lies not in elements never found elsewhere but rather in particular combinations of elements that are, in fact, quite common”. In this light, the Australian experience can be useful in our attempt to contextualize language and culture contact phenomena in Greece.

2. On the way to multiculturalism: The Australian experience

According to Clyne and Ozolins (2001: 373-374), the first measures taken in relation to the linguistic development of children from immigrant backgrounds can be described as assimilationist. This is due to a social and political ideology that treats immigrants as temporary visitors to the host country, an attitude that does not encourage the state to consider any changes in the way its system operates. At the level of education, the assimilationist approach entails the lack of bilingual school programmes, while priority is given to the teaching of languages considered ‘strong’ and useful at a global level (i.e. French, German etc.) and not to those that are actually used by the linguistic communities in the country (i.e. Italian, Greek, Chinese, Vietnamese, languages that are currently referred to as “Community Languages”). Moreover, public libraries are not equipped with linguistic material in community languages and the overall facilities offered to non-English speakers are minimal. At a second, more organized, level of receiving immigrants into a new society, some bodies or organizations in the public and private sector begin to treat the linguistic variety of the country as a more permanent characteristic and take initiatives in the direction of the linguistic facilitation of those groups. Such initiatives involve the establishment of language services for immigrants and the teaching of some community languages at school. At the same time, the linguistic data of immigrant communities become one of the interests of the state and special classes for the linguistic support of non-English speaking children are organized at school level.

A third stage is reached when the linguistic policy of the country goes beyond school limits and reaches all areas of public life, such as the media, social welfare, commerce etc. This change allows immigrants more and better access to many sectors of public life and is usually followed by an ideological
change that recognizes their contribution to the culture of the host society. In the case of Australia, this recognition has led to the acceptance of the overall linguistic and cultural variation of the country, which has resulted in the promotion of the languages and cultures of the indigenous populations. This, in turn, has given Australians the opportunity to redefine their own sense of linguistic and cultural identity. In a context of multicultural and multilingual recognition, many community languages are taught at school and measures are taken for their maintenance in the generations to come, since multilingualism is treated as a social asset rather than a handicap.

From the above brief discussion of the Australian multicultural/multilingual experience, we can see that the maintenance of immigrant languages, through the development of bilingualism, holds central position in the shaping of a multicultural identity, once we have accepted that multiculturalism is an asset to be cherished. As Fishman (1989: 32) has noted, language is the most potent means of maintenance or rejection of ethnic identity, insofar as it condenses and gives expression to all the other elements, historical and symbolic, of which our ethnic identity is composed.

3. The Greek multilingual context

Bilingual communities have existed in Greece long before the recent influx of immigrants. Although most of these communities have Greek as their native language (Trudgill 2001), we consider it important to mention the other languages that have been in use as they form part of the Greek multicultural context. These are: Turkish, Romany, Ladino, Armenian, Vlachika, Arvanitika, and Slavika. From the aforementioned languages, Turkish is the only one that is officially recognized in Greece as a minority language, spoken by the Turkish-speaking minority of western Thrace, a minority that is protected by the terms of the Treaty of Lausanne. However, issues of language contact and bilingualism have only recently become important for the Greek educational context, due to the existence of non-Greek speaking immigrants, mainly from countries geographically close to Greece. According to the information provided by the Ministry of Education (Μνήμης 1998: 109), the majority of Greek immigrants are from former USSR countries (40.2%) and Albania (37.9%).

In the light of the previous discussion, we will now move on to briefly address some theoretical issues in relation to language and culture contact in the Greek educational context, as these formed the backdrop for the research project which will be presented in this paper. Issues of multiculturalism and bilingualism are in the heart of what has been called “intercultural education”,...
a term that is often used in a manner that does not comply with its essential meaning (Δαμανάκης 2002: 7). As Δαμανάκης (ibid.) explains, intercultural education does not refer to the education of immigrants and linguistic minorities, as is often the case, but the education of all groups in a multicultural society, in situations of language and culture contact. As Γχόβογης writes, interculturalism requires "exchange, solidarity and the surpassing of limits" (2001: 78, my translation). We consider the intercultural theoretical context, as it has been defined above, useful in addressing the overall question of "what educational and political measures we should take for students coming from non-Greek backgrounds in our monolingual Greek schools" (Δαμανάκης 2001: 5, my translation). We believe that educational measures based on the notion of interculturalism would benefit all students, regardless of their linguistic and cultural background, and would challenge, in a creative and positive manner, Greek education as a whole.

Research on language contact and bilingualism in Greece concerns both language and education researchers. Evidence to this provides the work of Σκούφτογλου (1997, 2002), Δαμανάκης (2002), Γχόβογης (2002), Τσιάκαλος (2000) and Γχόβογης (2001). Moreover, although several definitions have been given to it, experts agree that bilingualism is a complex phenomenon that includes many types, such as societal or individual, child or adult, elite or folk, balanced or not, additive or subtractive and so on (for an informative discussion on all these types of bilingualism, see Baker 2000). It is not in our aims, in this paper, to expand on all types, definitions and parameters of bilingualism, but it is important to stress the complexities involved as we tend to ignore them in our approach and understanding of bilingual students, who are often treated as a homogeneous and static group. In reality, child bilingualism changes in much the same way as any other language pattern does, as the children's relations with their families, communities and overall society change in time. For our research purposes, we have adopted the well-known definition of bilingualism as "the parallel use of more than one languages in everyday interactions" (Haugen 1953: 7). We accept the premise that bilinguals are not the subtotal of two monolinguals, but have a unique linguistic configuration (Τσιάκαλος 2000: 35). They develop their skills in their languages according to their needs and the requirements of the surrounding social context, and they use their languages, separately or together, for different purposes, in different domains, for various communicative aims and with a variety of interlocutors (Grosjean 1990: 107).

Our research project aimed at the study of bilingual children in Greek primary schools, with the purpose of discovering ways in which monolingual
educators can be assisted in creating a friendly and productive educational environment in their classrooms that consist of monolingual and bilingual children learning together. More specifically, some questions or issues that motivated our research, derived from ethnographic research (Egan-Robertson and Bloome 2003: 46) are the following:

(a) How could bilingual children use the knowledge of their community and family?

(b) How could we create a truly multicultural classroom?

(c) How could we encourage bilingual children to bring to school their experiences, knowledge and languages, without fearing that they will be isolated and mocked?

Those are some of the questions we consider important, especially as we recognize that language development is essentially a social and cultural procedure (Bloome 1985: 134), as it necessitates sound social relations between teachers and students, monolingual and bilingual students, parents and students, writers and readers etc.

Moreover, our own previous research experience (Clyne et al. 1995: 163) has shown that the participation of community members in school activities contributes positively to the linguistic or bilingual development of primary school children. The recognition of the influence of the children's reality on their academic performance is also stressed by supporters of antiracist education (Τσιάκαλος 2000: 84), who claim, among other things, that in order to improve the lives and experiences of immigrants, we need to give them access to all social goods as well as to the political power necessary to actually obtain those goods. To this end, a fair and inclusive educational context of linguistic and cultural exchange, such as we mentioned earlier, can only function in a positive and empowering manner.

4. The research project and its preliminary findings

The project on bilingualism, with the theoretical parameters presented above, took place during the school year 2002-2003. For the purposes of our research, we selected three primary schools at the city of Volos, which, according to the official records available to us, had a high proportion of children from non-Greek speaking backgrounds. Below you can see a table with the student population of each of the three schools, PS1, PS2 and PS3:
Table 1. Primary schools and students' ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Bilingual students</th>
<th>Ethnic background of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PS1</td>
<td>Class B: 22</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Albanian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Class D: 17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Albanian (3), Rom (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS2</td>
<td>Class B: 22</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Albanian (4), Rom (1), Rumanian (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Class D: 17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Albanian (3), Rom (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS3</td>
<td>Class B: 20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Albanian (2), Rumanian (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Class D: 11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Albanian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the first half of 2002, the research team (consisting of myself and two student teachers) visited classes B and D (second and fourth grade) in each school and observed the teaching procedure. Our initial aim was to get to know the schools, students and teachers involved and to become accepted as observers of the classroom activities. More than 15 one- or two-hour visits took place before the end of the previous school year, i.e. June 2002. Each observation was realized by the student teachers and sometimes myself as part of the research team.

The observations in the schools in question gave us an overview of the main issues that arise in terms of the teachers' awareness of bilingualism, as well as the bilingual children's behaviour in a monolingual school environment. Although we cannot, and do not mean to, claim representativeness in such a small scale, qualitative research project, we can, however, draw some useful preliminary conclusions.

Some interesting comments made by the teachers themselves are the following:

(a) “Non Greek-speaking students do not have the necessary help from their parents”
(b) “They do not participate in the class activities”
(c) “They have problems with stressing the words correctly”
(d) “Immigrant children who are born in Greece cannot be distinguished from their Greek counterparts and need no special attention”

The two researchers also made some worthwhile comments:

(a) “Most non Greek-background children do not participate actively in class and tend to sit together or alone”
(b) “When we are present, teachers often go out of their way to address bilingual children, especially those they consider good students”
(c) “When there is spare time in class, teachers often prefer to spend it on more reading aloud”
(d) “During breaks, older students prefer to play with children of their own age rather than their classmates”
(e) “Many young children of immigrant descent claim that they speak only Greek at home”

Although our sample was limited, close observations in classes with bilingual children showed us that teachers tend not to be aware of bilingual issues, of the possible advantages of bilingualism for the children themselves as well as of the benefits of an intercultural orientation for the whole of their class. More specifically, through our interactions with the schools and the teachers, we became all the more aware of the inadequacies of the terms used to describe or, perhaps, label the bilingual children in Greek schools. Since there is a variety of ethnic backgrounds that the children come from, i.e., Albanian, Rom and Rumanian in the schools in question, and a variety of levels of Greek language performance (as both teachers and researchers claimed), the term “non-Greek speaking children” (translating the Greek term ἀλλόγλωσσα παιδία), currently used widely by many Greek educators, policy-makers and researchers, is at least inappropriate, if not false. Since the linguistic development of all children is a process, rather than a static situation, and since children that come from non-Greek speaking families and communities, have two language pools to draw from, the most suitable term to describe their linguistic behaviour is bilingual children. As we mentioned earlier, there is a plethora of kinds and types of bilingualism, which can be used to describe bilingual children much more accurately than the term ἀλλόγλωσσα. This realization has been extremely enlightening for us as researchers in the project in question.

Another issue that came out of the observations and is worth examining in more detail is that teachers tend to blame immigrant parents for not supporting their children, without adequately addressing the other parameters involved in the immigrant children’s poor performance, such as their own lack of expertise, the fact that some children are placed in classrooms with younger children, or the fact that when spare class time does exist, it is not spent in a manner that would benefit the children that need more attention and care, and, notably, the possible social prejudice that these parents and children encounter. Of course, these generalizations are not meant to diminish the work of many educators who, on a daily basis, spend great amounts of energy in order to adapt, in an inspiring manner, their resources for the benefit of their students (one example of an inspiring teacher initiative is the work of Σταμάτη and Μητρόπουλος 2002: 14-21). Research projects like our own are constantly inspired by individual
teachers' initiatives and only hope to be able to give some knowledge and ideas back to the educational community.

The research finding that teachers need to become aware of bilingual phenomena and to be encouraged to develop and implement intercultural educational tools has led us to the proposal of a continuing cooperation with the educators involved with the aim of suggesting innovative educational measures. We will conclude this paper by presenting, briefly, the first strategy that we have suggested to teachers of classes with bilingual students, namely the Portrait of the bilingual child.

5. Conclusion

The Portrait of the bilingual child is an activity which involves cooperation between the teachers, the students (bilingual and monolingual) and their parents. In effect, the bilingual child's portrait consists of the unique history, experiences, linguistic and cultural elements that each child considers important and useful to share with the rest of the class. During this activity, which can be supervised by the teachers themselves, bilingual children will provide information on their country of origin, their family history, their views on both countries, languages and cultures, in a way that is meaningful and important for them, with the cooperation of their families and other community members. The portraits, complete with text, pictures and children's drawings, can be displayed in the classroom and school as (a) a piece of work that makes bilingual children proud of being bilingual and of belonging to two cultures, and (b) an exercise of sharing and raising awareness for their teachers and monolingual schoolmates. They can also be used as sample work at relevant teacher training seminars.

We are convinced that activities such as the Portrait of the bilingual child will contribute to the reinforcement of an intercultural educational context of linguistic and cultural exchange, while it will, simultaneously, promote the bilingual status of the children involved, allowing for each child's uniqueness to come forward in a positive and empowering manner. As Tollefson (1991: 9-13) writes, it is impossible to adopt a neutral or objective attitude towards linguistic and cultural heterogeneity, since every language policy we opt for shapes, one way or another, the world in which we choose to live. We propose a world of sharing, understanding and language and culture exchange.
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