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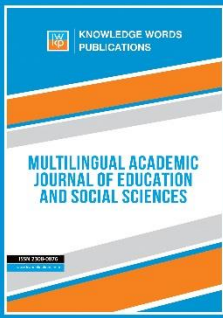
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## Teaching Greek as a Second Language to Adults of Refugee and Immigrant Backgrounds: The Case of the 'Basic Communication Skills' Program

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### Abstract

This paper presents data on Greek as a second language teaching and learning practices designed, implemented and evaluated in the 'beginners' Greek' workshop for adult refugees and immigrants, which was run by the intra-university group for bilingualism and multiculturalism in education and society 'Polydromo', during the 2016-2017 academic year, in Greece. After introducing the theoretical principles and the fundamental target-setting, the paper focuses on the 'Basic Communication Skills' language-teaching program which was implemented using the action-research methodology within the framework of the 'Create for Refugees' project, and presents an analysis of a single teaching unit on Health. The description of teaching practices unfolding in this particular community framework is followed by the reflections of both the educator and the learners on these practices, in order to show their translanguagistic nature and particular interactive characteristics that collectively developed through the participation of all those involved. The paper concludes with an evaluation of the total teaching and research experience by highlighting the contribution of the second language literacy practices of the program in promoting not merely the learning of new language and communication skills for the learners, but also new ways of co-existence, collaboration and empowerment for all the participants in this particular learning community.

**Keywords:** Teaching and Learning Greek as a Second Language (L2), Adult Refugees and Immigrants, Translanguaging as L2 Literacy Practice, Learning Community, Empowerment

### Introduction

The need to teach Greek as a second language to adults and children of refugee and immigrant backgrounds became urgent once again during the last years due to immigrant and refugee flows which have created new socio-cultural and language teaching realities (Kantzou et al., 2017).

One of the bodies of non-typical education, which took up action immediately in this particular field, was the intra-university group for bilingualism and multiculturalism in education and society 'Polydromo'<sup>1</sup>, located in the greek city of Thessaloniki<sup>2</sup>. One of the group's main actions was the formation and operation of free of charge multilingual language workshops for adults and children, with the aim of bringing together creatively languages and cultures in education and society, and, in extension, the widening of linguistic and cultural experiences, knowledge, and identities of all the participants (Tsokalidou, 2016; Tsokalidou et al., 2021).

### **Basic Theoretical Principles and Aims of Teaching Greek as an L2 to Adult Refugees and Immigrants**

The Greek language workshop for adult newcomers, refugees and immigrants, was one of the language workshops that operated in 'Polydromo' from the start to the end of the academic year 2016-2017, with the teaching provided by volunteer post-graduate or doctoral researchers in the field of language and literacy education in multilingual settings.

The operation of the workshop was based on the language-education principles of current socio-linguistic and sociocultural theories of bi/multilingualism, of acquiring a 'second' language (Baker, 2011; Cummins, 2005; Van den Branden, 2006), and of translanguaging<sup>3</sup> (Tsokalidou, 2017a; Garcia & Wei, 2014; Cummins, 2019); these were combined with the principles of critical multilingual (multi)literacy (Garcia, 2017; Tsiplakou, 2015; Dinas & Goti, 2016; Luke & Dooley, 2011; Cope and Kalantzis, 2000), and of the critical inclusion education for adults (Kitsiou et al., 2019), in an intercultural framework (Tsokalidou, 2016a).

On the basis of these principles, the main objectives for the teaching and learning of the Greek language were:

- a) acquiring fundamental oral language and literacy skills;
- b) developing a critical multilingual and multicultural<sup>4</sup> awareness, and,
- c) the empowerment of social inclusion, participation and identities of all those involved.

Within this framework, an open, versatile, task-based program was designed in such way as to be adaptable in the service of the particular linguistic and communicational needs of those under training<sup>5</sup>. It was partly implemented in the context of the language-education

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<sup>1</sup> See Tsokalidou, 2016, for further information.

<sup>2</sup> It is the second largest city of Greece.

<sup>3</sup> In the context of this paper, the term 'translanuaging' refers to the "lingual process in which the bilingual learners perform verbal acts in regards with reading, writing, conversation in dialogue, nodding, etc., transcending the boundaries of a single language [...]. In this way, it is an educational process and practice which contributes to lingual creativity through a synthesis of lingual and cultural multimodal elements" (Tsokalidou, 2017: 43).

<sup>4</sup> On the development of multilingual and multicultural skills, see also Chatzidaki, 2016: 91-92.

<sup>5</sup> On the necessity for fulfilling these basic needs on a national and international level, see Van Avermaet & Gysen, 2008; Koiliari, 2005; Mattheoudakis, 2005.

program under the title ‘Basic Communication Skills’<sup>6</sup> of the educational project ‘CR.E.A.T.E FOR REFUGEES’<sup>7</sup>.

### **Design, Implementation and Evaluation of the Language Education Program ‘Basic Communication Skills in Greek’**

#### ***Design***

The ‘Basic Communication Skills’ program in Greek, English, German, and Arabic, was part of a wider educational project under the title ‘Crosscultural Educational Activities for Refugees’ (CR.E.A.T.E FOR REFUGEES), implemented by Polydromo in collaboration with the NGO Intersos and the UN High Commission for Refugees, between April and June 2017. To develop these skills in the Greek language, four two-hour language-teaching thematic units were designed<sup>8</sup> for identity/family, travel, health, and work/education. Each one of those four units involved specific learning objectives, speech/literacy events, vocabularies, and activities (Van Avermaet & Gysen, 2008).

As the foremost objective was to promote multilingual and intercultural knowledge and understanding through the building of bridges of communication between the Greek language and those of the adult learners, the thematic-centered educational material was:

(a) multilingual (bilingual or trilingual<sup>9</sup> poetic and identity texts with their respective practice sheets promoting the use of all linguistic and cultural assets of the learners in producing, exchanging, and negotiating meaning),

(b) multimodal (images, songs, videos from the countries and cultures of origin and residence), and

(c) learner-centred in order to respond to the diversified linguistic and cultural needs of the diverse

target audience (Plutzer & Ritter, 2008).

The activities and the corresponding language practices were designed to involve all the participants in interacting through Greek and their languages as collaborating members in a

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<sup>6</sup> For designing the program we had to take into consideration the previous experience and the available materials of the ‘Polydromo’ group, as well as the relevant previous programs in the field of teaching Greek as a second language, such as MATHEME project of the Greek Language and Multilingualism Laboratory of the University of Thessaly (2015) and other similar ones (see Arvaniti, 2011; Katalipsi Sinialo, 2012; Skourtu & Kazoulli, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Roula Tsokalidou, co-ordinator of the ‘Polydromo’ group, had the scientific responsibility and was the co-ordinator of the program, whilst Evi Kompiadou, in charge of Polydromo’s educational actions, was the administrator. For further information, see Tsokalidou, 2017a: 243-246.

<sup>8</sup> The units were designed by the educators and members of the scientific committee for the program, Aimilia Mello Kekia, Maria Paraskeva, and Virginia Arvanitidou, under the guidance of the responsible scientist. In particular, Kekia designed the units on identity/family and health (with the help of Ioulia Papadopoulou for the topic of identity); Paraskeva and Arvanitidou designed the units of travel and of education/employment. All the educators worked closely, both together as well as with their colleagues who worked on other language workshops in designing the units, but, at the same time, were free to exercise their own choices to serve the diverse language communicational and social needs of their learners.

<sup>9</sup> The trilinguality of these materials was supported also by the use of selected online multilingual dictionaries, such as the one of Metadrasi (2016).

community of learning and practice (Wegner, 1998), depending on their levels of bi/multi literacy. Each unit contained, as an integral part, the processes of (self)evaluation in order to fortify the critical reflection and the metacognitive learning for all the learners.

Due to the program's structure<sup>10</sup> and to the processes of its implementation<sup>11</sup>, the educational process took the shape of collaborative action-research (Altrichter et al., 1993). In particular, the program's educators were studying their actions using a variety of research tools (collaborative observation, field notes, journals, emails, photographs), and were redesigning their next steps working together and with the learners, but also with the responsible scientist and the members of the program's co-ordination team who had the role of critical friends.

An example of educational processes and practices developed in the context of a specific unit has been summarised below.

### ***Implementation***

#### **The language-teaching thematic unit of Health**

##### ***Description***

The Health<sup>12</sup> unit was taught at the 'Polydromo Hangout of Educational Creation'<sup>13</sup> on June 6, 2017<sup>14</sup> to a group of twelve adults, mostly men, aged 20 and above, all of them recent entrants as refugees and immigrants from Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, fluent in a variety of Arabic dialects, but also with basic knowledge of English.

The main objective of the unit was to empower the learners linguistically and to incite them to make active use of their rights to health services in their new country of habitation through the inception and production of socially contextualized lexicogrammatical structures and meanings in Greek to fulfill basic healthcare needs<sup>15</sup>.

The learning process in its entirety unfolded with the continuous use, interchange or even mixing of mostly everyday registers<sup>16</sup> and of their respective lexicogrammatical elements of Greek, English, Arabic by the learners, the educator, and the interpreters. This process made possible the production and negotiation of meaning, as well as the consequent promotion of communication and language learning. In particular, interaction started with the introduction to the unit for everyone present, which involved:

(a) Processes of mutual introductions and group forming which brought into contact all of the languages and identities of those involved (through a warm welcoming, introductions to each

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<sup>10</sup> Teaching of four units in two cycles of lessons for different groups of refugee and immigrant learners.

<sup>11</sup> Design, implementation, evaluation of each unit in the first cycle, and ameliorative redesign, implementation, and evaluation of the same unit in the second.

<sup>12</sup> This was the third unit of the program.

<sup>13</sup> The space in which the actions of the 'Polydromo' group were taking place from 2013 to 2018 in the city of Thessaloniki.

<sup>14</sup> The teaching of this unit took place in the second cycle of lessons, and was a revised version of the respective unit of the first cycle (05.05.2017). Both lessons were given by Keki (who speaks English and two more European languages, but not Arabic), with the support of the two interpreters and the members of the program.

<sup>15</sup> For the connection of language teaching with the active citizenship and human rights education, see also Plutzer & Ritter, 2008.

<sup>16</sup> For the term 'register', see Halliday & Hasan, 1987.

other, speaking out / writing down of names and countries of origin on labels in the first languages and in Greek), and was followed by

(b) Work that forced the emergence of the learners' experiences and knowledge in regards with the theme of the unit through the appropriate visual stimuli (images, works of art), which led to a re-signification of health as an inalienable right in any place of temporary or permanent residence.

The next phase of the lesson contained a more dynamic interaction between the learners and the educator, and of the learners with each other. The later were supported here in exercising their actual right to health by participating in group activities to produce and understand a variety of spoken and written genres (Kekia, 2011) in everyday greek contexts. Specifically, they attempted through socially framed role-playing, expressions and gestures, visual aids, props<sup>17</sup>, and a continuous translanguaging interaction in Greek, English, and Arabic:

(a) to state the condition of their health when unwell, and to form a request for medical help (*I do not feel well, I feel sick, I need a doctor...*), utilising the available free health services of the city (calls to duty hospitals, finding social care surgeries),

(b) to describe health issues to a doctor (*I have a problem with..., my...aches*), to understand advice (*you will need to..., you will have to take...*), and to form a request for additional explanations when they do not understand (*what do I need to do?, I did not understand...*), as well as

(c) to look for medicines, or other alternative therapies in relation to their needs and priorities at the time (*where is the social care pharmacy?, I want/would like this medication..., I am looking for therapy...*).

The third and final phase of the lesson focused on individual reading and writing of the basic lexicogrammar of the unit in short multimodal texts in two specific social contexts (hospital, pharmacy)<sup>18</sup> and was completed with everyone present by a free oral signification of the following illustrated verses in Greek and Arabic: *Do not think that the stars were extinguished just because the sky went dark*, and *Live, love, struggle*, for the further multilinguistic, psycho-social and intercultural empowerment of the group.

## **Evaluation**

### **The Educator's Reflection**

Despite the difficulties caused by the handling of the wide linguistic and cultural diversity of the group, as well as the insistent attitude of some learners for quick, out of context learning of the Greek alphabet<sup>19</sup>, the main aspects of the learning process, according to the field notes and the research diary<sup>20</sup>, were:

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<sup>17</sup> Doctors' prescriptions, boxes of medicines, instructions etc.

<sup>18</sup> In this activity, the participants were invited to respond on a working sheet, with contextualised and diversified assistance on occasion and with the additional scaffolding of the specifically designed polydromic Greek alphabet (Tsokalidou, 2017b).

<sup>19</sup> This attitude reveals also his reluctance towards specific activities, such as, e.g., the formation of the team, which he perceived as a waste of teaching time.

<sup>20</sup> Alternative research data on the implementation of the lesson, which facilitate the critical reflection of the educator/researcher after its completion, were also offered by the two participant educators who worked as assistants and observers.

- a) The positive learning atmosphere as a byproduct of, on one hand, the acceptance of and the respect for all the languages, the experiences, and the identities of all the participants; And, on the other, of the fact that the topic addressed the immediate needs of the learners;
- b) The active multilingual interaction between educator and learners and the promotion of communication and collaboration between the members of the group through continuous use of everyday registers of Greek, English, Arabic, and of their corresponding translanguaging combinations: e.g. the combinatory use of Greek words for 'my...hurts' ('πονάει το ...') and the arabic word for 'head' (رأس), to express pain in the context of a specific social situation;
- c) The evolving linguistic help that the learners offered each other both in the typical and the non typical phases of the lesson, i.e. when the request for further clarifications was made in a particular language and the clarifications were offered in the same language by members of the team themselves who had similar linguistic background and, therefore, acted as informal interpreters;
- d) The initiatives taken by the learners for the collaborative formation of the learning processes depending on their needs: e.g. expressing their request for further linguistic support on using the free medical services in the city through additional electronic materials; and, finally:
- e) The entire promotion of understanding and learning of Greek in a variety of everyday situations through the combination of translanguaging practices with paralinguistic or extralinguistic renditions of significations (prosody, facial expressions, gestures, etc.), but also through the educator's continuous provision of positive re-enforcement incentives for each linguistic and multisemiotic action of the participants.

### **Reflections of the Learners**

According to data from the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the reflections of the learners<sup>21</sup>, involvement in learning Greek was important for them, as they signified either in Greek, English, or in their own first languages<sup>22</sup>:

- a) positive feelings: 'καταληκτεκα<sup>23</sup>' ('amazing') (a student from Pakistan), 'Π KALA' ('very good') (a student from Syria);
- b) the usefulness of what they had learned: 'a practical and pleasant lesson' (translated from Arabic<sup>24</sup>) (another student from Syria);
- c) comprehension: 'Today is our greek lesson very nice. I am understand every thing' (a student from Pakistan);

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<sup>21</sup> They were recorded in the closing activity of the unit under the title 'Today's lesson...in a word or an image?'

<sup>22</sup> Faithful transliteration from the original manuscripts.

<sup>23</sup> The Greek word 'καταπληκτικά' had been used by the teacher of the lesson in rewarding the active participation of the learners during various phases, and had been translated by her into English, and by the two interpreters into Arabic and Farsi. Here, the word is repeated by the learners themselves to serve a similar language function in a different context of situation (evaluation of the lesson), and with a creative translanguaging use of all the means for the production of meaning they possessed.

<sup>24</sup> The translations were provided by the program's interpreters.

- d) participation in a community: ‘Μου αρέσι αυΤή Τάξη I like lhīs class’ (a student from Afghanistan);
- e) widening of linguistic identity: ‘I Like i Greek language’ (I like learning your language) (translated from Benghali) (a student from Bangladesh);

These written translanguage configurations of meanings, combined with their respective verbal ones after the end of the lesson, express the obvious interest of the team to continue learning Greek: ‘We thank you for working with us, we are asking for more work together’, whilst they show the critical stance of the members on the duration of the program: ‘Amazing lesson if it is to be continued’ (two translated texts from Farsi by two students from Iran).

### **Concluding Remarks**

In conclusion, teaching Greek as a second language to adult refugee or immigrant beginners at the ‘Polydromo’ workshop during the last trimester of the 2016-2017 academic year, in the framework of the *CR.E.A.T.E. for Refugees* ‘Basic Communication Skills’ project, was a complex and demanding language-teaching endeavour, a challenge for everyone in the ‘Polydromo’ group.

Based on the total teaching-research experience from the implementation of the project and its reflective evaluation both immediately after, as well as now, five years forward, the main findings worth mentioning are the following: Translanguaging teaching and learning practices for ‘beginners’ Greek’ in all the cycles of lessons were developed collaboratively by the educators and the learners as equal members of a learning and practice community, and, despite the difficulties and the impediments, were successful within the specific community context in promoting Greek language and communication skills, a multilingual awareness and intercultural understanding.

Those achievements would not have been feasible if the translanguaging learning and teaching practices of Greek had not emphasized strongly the non-verbal signification, which they supported through multiple multimodal means and materials, diversified on a case to case basis; Most significantly, they would not have been successful, if they were not combined creatively with practices of psycho-social support for the learners as both individuals and community members. Such practices were decisive for the final outcomes of the whole enterprise: (a) the building together of a human<sup>25</sup> relation between educators and learners through complex identity transformations of both, and (b) the promotion, through this relation, of not merely novel linguistic skills for the learners, but also of new ways of co-existing, co-working and empowering for all the participants in this specific learning community.

### **Research Contribution**

With the above qualitative findings, which result from the investigation of a second language literacy teaching intervention with a limited number of adult refugees and migrants, for one trimester, in a single area of Greece as a host country, the present action-research contributes to a deeper understanding and further utilization of the differentiated literacy practices that can be applied in the learning and teaching Greek, as well as other languages, as a second language to these populations. In particular, it confirms and strengthens findings of previous

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<sup>25</sup> See, also, Pathiaki & Simopoulos, 2015.



researches that argue that these vulnerable social groups have differentiated literacy needs, which require corresponding differentiated L2 literacy education approaches to meet them (Marrapodi, 2013; Fanta-Vagenshtein, 2011). It demonstrates that the design of second language teaching proposals that consistently follow the principles of critical multilingual literacy (García, 2017) and translanguaging pedagogy (Garcia & Wei, 2014) can promote the development of communicative skills in the second language through the implementation of a series of courses that do not have a socially decontextualized focus on the linguistic form (Kantzou et al., 2017), but instead are developed as dynamically evolving events of translanguaging intercultural communication and cooperation, meaningful for each participant (Skourtou et al., 2020). Furthermore, the research demonstrates the consequences of the combined implementation of language and socio-emotional empowerment practices for learners in expanding not only their (multi)linguistic literacy knowledge but also their identities (Cummins, 2005) and the relationships they develop with each other and with their instructors for the benefit of both.

### Implications

These alternative and mutually empowering ways of co-existing and collaborating that can be (re)formed together dynamically by teachers and students of Greek or/and other languages and cultures, within learning communities, such as the 'Polydromo' community described above, the factors influencing them and the implications expected to have for further transformations of all those involved into critically thinking and active citizens (García, 2017, Griva & Panitsides, 2013) of wider multi-linguistic/cultural communities where they live together by choice or necessity, are central questions and quests that need to be promoted by the research<sup>26</sup> undertaken in the field of refugees and immigrants' L2 literacy education on both national and international level.

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<sup>26</sup> For the promotion of these research questions, see the latest research project of the 'Polydromo' group, under the title 'Teaching language through the eyes of refugees', in Tsokalidou et al., 2021.

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