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German Language Teaching in a Multicultural Class in Greece: A Case Study about Students' and Parents' Perceptions of Plurilingualism

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Abstract: After many decades of research, publications, and exchange of good practices, the debate about intercultural pedagogy, the importance of bilingual education and the promotion of existing multiculturalism in school classes remains topical in the public educational system in Greece. My ongoing research interest focuses on the inclusive education of students with migrant backgrounds, taking into account the foreign language lessons in public education in Greece, specifically the teaching of German as a second foreign language. The empirical part of the study took place in a public primary school in a Province of the city of Karditsa during the school year 2021/2022. A class of 18 students of the 6th Grade, where 7 of them were bilingual/multilingual with a migrant background, was under research during the second and third trimester in the German language lesson. The research work is based on the methodology of the Functional-Pragmatics language theory by Ehlich and Rehbein. The data analysis is in progress; however, questionnaires were given to all participant students, and interviews were conducted with all bilinguals parents.

Keywords: multilingual education; plurilingual repertoire; German language teaching; cultural diversity

1. Introduction

Schools are far more than simple knowledge providers or day carers for children. In a complex and multicultural world, where terms such as soft skills, social skills, empathy, and inclusion should be characteristics for being a proper human being, who respects him/herself and others, the role of modern schools is more significant than ever before. The most challenging assignment for any school community is to foster such skills in students and help them become future democratic citizens.

More recently, the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) of the Council of Europe did the following:

- Places democratic citizenship and human rights at the core of teaching and learning;
- Makes a new recommendation on the importance of plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture;
- Recognizes the cognitive, linguistic and societal benefits of learning a range of languages;
- Recognizes that plurilingual and intercultural education also support the educational and social inclusion of migrant and marginalized learners [1].

Greece, an East Mediterranean country, has a three-decade history of immigration, as a sending and hosting country. In Greek society, the first discussions concerning terms such as intercultural education, integration, and learning Greek as a second language started with the arrival of migrant students, especially from Albania or the expatriates. Hundreds of research studies have been conducted on these issues. The most characteristic studies are the ones about bilingualism in Greek schools [2], about teachers' attitudes and parents' views on bilingualism [3], and, more recently, on cultural and linguistic diversity in the

Greek primary school [4]. The most recent research is about the newly arrived refugees in non-typical education in Greece after 2015 by Simopoulos and Stergiou [5]. A common finding is that all the above-mentioned research studies examine the way students with migrant backgrounds learn the dominant (Greek) language as L2, their literacy level, and the relation between their bilingualism and their school performance.

In the school community, the languages of origin of bilingual/multilingual students can have different roles and functions. Students must have the opportunity to activate previous knowledge, attitudes, and experiences that come from L1 and/or L2. The student-centered teaching that focuses on creating connections with previous knowledge is with no doubt the most valued. Students' cultural backgrounds are considered a very crucial starting point for didactics and the application of appropriate educational materials [6] (p. 526).

The present study took place in the context of the current doctoral studies of the author in the School of German Language and Literature of the Aristotle University in Thessaloniki. First, the methodology and the profile of the research are presented, followed by some initial findings with conclusions. At the end, the researcher concludes this paper with several suggestions for further research.

2. Materials and Methods

The main aim of the research is to highlight the plurilingual repertoire of all members in a multicultural class through German language teaching in a Greek school. Further aims are the following:

- To raise all students' awareness on issues related to multilingualism, plurilingualism and migration through a foreign language lesson.
- To enhance the oral competence, as well as the listening comprehension skills, of bilingual students in order to increase their participation in German lessons.
- To encourage students to transfer their plurilingual ability [7] and their prior knowledge into the foreign language lesson.

The hypotheses made by the researcher, based also on her teaching experience, were the following:

1. Students at Greek schools are not familiar with or have false knowledge about terms such as bilingualism, multilingualism, plurilingualism and language(s) of origin.
2. Due to Karagiannidou [8], the aim of multilingual didactics is to involve positively "the cognitive and emotional experiences of a child from L1 and L2" (p. 24). It is assumed that, particularly in foreign language teaching, an "Awakening to Languages" ("Eveil aux Langues") [9] through specific activities takes place in class.
3. Students with various languages of origin have a better academic performance in foreign language(s), specifically in oral communication and listening comprehension skills. They have the ability to bring transferable skills from L1 or L2 to L3 and L4, and it is believed that pair and groupwork, as well as peer learning, enhance their lesson participation.

The research questions of the study in accordance with the hypotheses were as follows:

a. Are students of a multilingual and multicultural class and school staff aware of its linguistic repertoire?
b. When bilingual students work in groups or pairs, does peer communication and participation in the foreign language lesson increase?
c. Do bilingual students use linguistic or cultural elements of their language(s) of origin in the foreign language lesson? If yes, how often?
d. Does the foreign language teacher take into account the personal experiences and prior knowledge of students with migrant/refugee backgrounds? Does he/she use specific strategies or methods to enhance their oral participation in class?

2.1. The Qualitative Research

The research was conducted in a small village of about 1500 inhabitants, in the district of Karditsa in central Greece. It took place during the school year 2021/2022, specifically during the second and third trimesters of 2022. A sixth-grade class of the primary school was filmed during the German language lesson by two cameras in stable positions. The researcher was the German language teacher of the class at the same time. It should be noted that according to the Greek Educational System, foreign language education has the following structure: children begin to learn English as a first foreign language even from kindergarten (starting from the school year 2021/2022), then they choose a second foreign language between French and German (and in very few cases, Italian) from the fifth grade, and they continue learning two foreign languages until the 11th grade (the Greek lyceum). For monolingual students, German is language three, L3, taught within the school context and for bilinguals, it is L4 or even L5 in cases, in which there are trilingual children who have adopted two home languages.

In the class under research, there are 18 students in total: 10 boys and 8 girls. Among them, 11 are monolinguals, meaning that both parents are of Greek origin and students grew up with one home language. The other 7 students grew up with different home language(s) than the one spoken in the dominant community, either from one or both parents' sides (Table 1). All parents of the bilingual students had a migrant background. It is important to mention the student referred to as D., for anonymous reasons, has parents who are both of Greek origin and had lived in Germany for 20 years. Thus, the student was born in Germany, and his first official schooling was in the German educational system, at the kindergarten and the two first classes of primary school. It is worth mentioning that the student repeated the first class of German primary school.

Table 1. Bilinguals' linguistic profile.

Codes	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Age	12	12	12	12	12	12	12
Sex	f	f	f	m	m	f	m
Heritage language/-es	Albanian	Albanian	Albanian	Greek	Albanian Greek	Romanian Albanian	Spanish Albanian
Born in Greece	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
First written language acquisition	Greek	Greek	Greek	German	Greek	Greek	Greek
Knowledge of heritage language/-(s)	Albanian	Albanian	Albanian	Greek	Greek Albanian (till 5y)	Romanian (more) Albanian (little)	English (Parents' communication language)
Foreign languages	English German	English German	English German	German English (little)	English German	English German	English German
Language use of applica-tions/social media	Greek Albanian (messenger)	Greek	Greek	Greek	Greek	No use	No use
Heritage language use in lessons	None	None	None	-	None	In German lesson ("since some words in Romanian are alike")	None

2.2. Methodology

The main methodology in this research is the functional-pragmatic discourse analysis of communication in the language lesson. Discourse is a linguistic act, in which two or more actants interact at the same time in an oral or written situation. In the functional-pragmatic theory, mainly empirical data are analyzed in the form of authentic texts and discourses

that happen in a social context [10]. According to Ehlich [11], school is an institution, where learning occurs in a socially organized form. There are two types of discourse: the teaching–learning discourse ("Lehr-Lern Diskurs") and the lesson discourse ("Unterricht-diskurs"). The main difference between these types is that in the first one, the learner is totally dependent on the teacher, as there is a knowledge deficit. In the second discourse, however, the learners' dominance rises, as its dependence on the teacher decreases. The analysis of the videos will be focused on whether the teacher is using certain patterns of action "Handlungsmuster" [12] (p. 97), e.g., roleplays, or peer questions and certain strategies as group or pair work. The question of if those methods or strategies enhance bilingual students' oral communication skills and participation in class will subsequently be examined.

A selection of the language data will be transcribed in detail using the transcription software EXMARaLDA (Extensible Markup Language for Discourse Annotation). It is actually "a system of concepts, data formats and tools for the computer assisted transcription and annotation of spoken language, and for the construction and analysis of spoken language corpora" [13]. The transcription that will be made is HIAT ("Halbinterpretative Arbeitstranskription") by Ehlich and Rehbein [14,15], which means a Semi-Interpretative Working Transcription.

A triangulation of two more methodological tools has been made to strengthen the data analysis and research reliability [16] (p. 157). Questionnaires on students' views about bilingualism/multilingualism were distributed to the students in class during a recorded session. The researcher posed different questions to the monolingual students than to the bilingual ones. Additionally, a journal was kept, where the researcher made some significant notes after class, when possible.

The semi-structured interview tool was also used, this time with the parents with a migrant background. All eight parents of the bilingual/multilingual students responded positively to the headteacher's invitation and attended a meeting with the researcher at the school.

Below are the core questions of the parents' interview (translated from Greek to English). In some cases, informal discussions followed the recordings.

1. Where do you come from?
2. How many years have you been in Greece?
3. Which languages do you speak and at what level each? (Which language do you speak with your husband/wife?)
4. Do you feel an independent user of the Greek language? (Do you need any help with the language in public services or in a similar situation?)
5. What is your child's relationship to your heritage language/-(s)? (How often do they speak, in which communicative situations, and with whom?)
6. Would you like your heritage language to be taught at school (morning or afternoon classes)?
7. Do you try to familiarize your child with your heritage culture in any way?
8. Do you know if the school has taken any action to highlight the fact that there are bilingual/multilingual students?

2.3. Strengths and Weaknesses

The fact that the researcher was at the same time the teacher of the class was the most difficult part of the research. She sometimes had to take a few significant notes in a kind of research journal, but there was no time to do so at school after class. So, she had to memorize the key points or note them down at home. Even the interviews had to be conducted early in the morning on the day of the German lesson. The teacher had to set the cameras during the break and then pack again, before leaving for another class. Some specific students were always very eager to help with the technical part. The German lesson was held once a week in a two-hour (block) lesson. That means that, during the

recordings, none of the lesson hours could be cancelled, and nothing could fall behind schedule, something extremely difficult in the Greek Educational system.

The headteacher's support to the whole research, however, was very touching. He personally called all parents for the interviews. It is worth mentioning that, according to Greek legislation, it is obligatory for the researcher to have parental consent for the recordings. All parents signed the form without second thought, except for one mother who was a bit hesitant at first but, after speaking with the headteacher, was reassured and gave her consent too. The teachers' board were also very supportive, as they all signed the research approval document, and even rescheduled a school day trip for another day, in order for the researcher not to miss the recordings. Especially the primary teacher of the class encouraged students to participate in the particular research of the University, highlighting the benefits of their participation.

In general, the conditions under which the research was conducted were not ideal for the researcher, but they could definitely have been much more unfavorable.

3. Initial Results

3.1. Parents' Interviews

There are some initial findings that are worth mentioning regarding the interviews with the parents:

- In the case of the student, referred to as student D, there is an obvious dislike towards the heritage language/culture of the country where he was born and lived for the first nine years of his life.

  Mom: "[...] he was extremely happy, when we decided to move to Greece permanently, yes. He has lots of issues. This is what I am telling to him: are you a racist? Are you? I am at odds with D a lot, he doesn't want German" («είχε πετάξει από τη χαρά του, μόλις θα κατεβαίναμε μόνιμα Ελλάδα, ναι. Έχει θέματα πολλά, έχει. Αυτό του λέω, είσαι ρατσιστής, είσαι; ...Ζορίζομαι με τον Δ. πολύ, ότι δε θέλει τα Γερμανικά»).

  The researcher is wondering if the linguistic academic level and the school failure during the school years in Germany played some role in his aversion toward the German language, although his mom said that she believes it does not.

  It is worth mentioning that during the school year of the research, student D did not participate in the German lesson; on the contrary, he had disciplinary issues with all teachers. The next school year, however, in the new educational level (junior high school in the German lesson), at least he showed a spectacular change for the better, regarding both his participation and behavior:

- Two (2) parents have mentioned the fact that their pediatricians have encouraged them to start teaching their child their heritage language.
- All migrant parents saw the beginning of school life for their children as an obstacle to continuing the teaching of their heritage language at home.
- In the mixed-marriages family environment, there seem to be certain attitudes and beliefs towards the minority or heritage languages. This parental attitude toward a particular language determines the specific language choice at home and, conclusively, the bilingual development of the child [17] (p. 63).

  I: "*Do you speak Albanian?*"

  Mom: "*No, no*".

  The way she said no and her expression revealed a sense of dislike of the language. The father, however, of the family in another discussion with the researcher this year said, with a smile on his face, that his child liked Romanian more.

- The school community has not taken any action to promote multilingualism or/and intercultural understanding among students according to parents' opinions.

- One mother was at first in a "defensive" position and when she was asked the question "what language/-(s) do you speak at home?", she answered *"Albanian, of course, what did you speak in Germany?"* («*αλβανικά, φυσικά, εσύ τι μιλούσες στη Γερμανία;*»). She thought that maybe I lived in Germany for years or I am of German heritage.

3.2. Questionnaires

During the analysis of the monolingual students' questionnaires about their view on bilingualism (Figure 1), the following results are worth being mentioned:
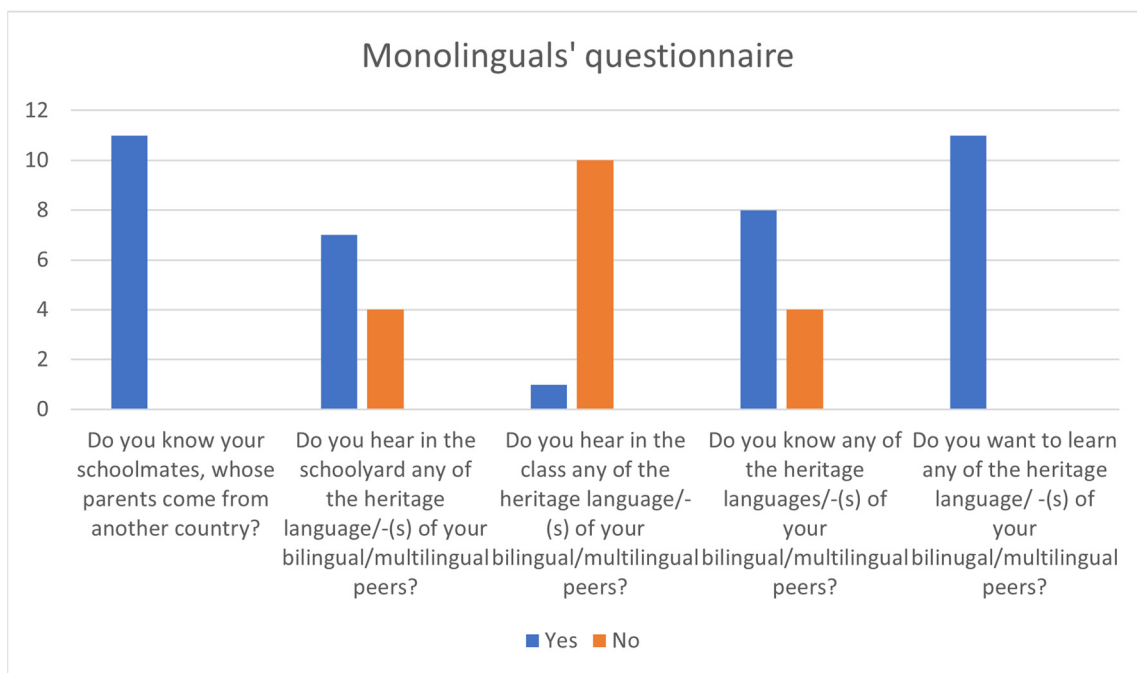

Figure 1. Analysis of monolingual students' questionnaire.

As shown above, all students know who their bilingual peers are, which is something that proves that in small societies, students meet and interact with each other after school more easily and are aware of the cultural background of their classmates. It is remarkable that 8 of the 11 students know some words in the heritage language of the majority of their bilingual schoolmates, which is Albanian, and they were willing to write them down in the questionnaire.

It comes as no surprise that 10 out of 11 students do not hear the heritage language(s) of their bilingual peers in any lesson or in the class. Only one has mentioned that she hears some in the German language lesson. The researcher believes that because the questionnaire was filled in at the end of the recording sessions, the students have already been familiarized with terms such as multilingualism and plurilingualism. All students want to learn any of their schoolmates' heritage language(s), referring to the Albanian and Romanian languages.

To the question "what is your first thought about bilingualism?", the answers were diverse and worth mentioning (translated from Greek):

- The country, where the language is spoken.
- That it is a gift, because, you know many languages.
- It is very nice, to know other languages, too.
- All the children, whose mum and dad come from other countries, like Albania, Romania, Peru.
- That it is a nice thing to know lots of languages.
- When a person knows several languages from his/her parents.
- They have more knowledge, than us, we only speak one language.

- A person, who knows/speaks a lot of languages and believes in several religions, but he/she has more faith in one of them.
- The other languages are bizarre.
- It is very nice; it has a nice pronunciation; I like Albanian very much.

It is strongly believed that the answers of the children came from a type of raise in awareness, that was cultivated during the whole school year within the German lesson by the teacher. If the questionnaire had been given to the students before or at the beginning of the research, the answers would probably have been different. It certainly needs time and more research in order to prove the progress of their awareness.

The analysis of the video recordings is still in progress as it is ongoing research.

4. Conclusions

It is clear that the teacher herself used to speak during the German lesson too much. Group work was not carried out at all, either in the recorded sessions or in any other lessons, with the exception of the sports lesson. The strongest proof for that was the class arrangement. Students sat on their own during the whole year, despite the fact that at the time, this was not obligatory due to COVID-19 restrictions. It seems, that it was simply convenient for the teachers, as the class was quieter in this way.

In the German lesson, students were used to sitting in pairs, after the first recording, as the frame was otherwise not suitable for the camera on the one hand, and on the other, it served the researcher's interests.

Concluding this paper, the following observations should be presented:

- A specific student with a migrant background, who barely participated in the lesson at first, made enormous progress and, in the end, helped other students with pair work.
- Although students sitting in pairs were obviously louder, they helped each other with exercises, something that reduced the teacher's speaking in a way.
- Once, when students participated in group work with a jigsaw puzzle, they really enjoyed the learning process, as was obvious in the recording too, and their participation was universal regardless of whether the students were monolingual or bilingual.
- During the current school year, in the new school, students sit again on their own, and it is clear that this does not help in encouraging the students' participation and communication.
- Students are now all aware of their peers' heritage language(s) and the countries of origin of their peers' parents without any exception. The case of the multilingual student whose parents come from Peru and Albania is now clear in the whole class. The researcher believes that this is something that helped raise self-confidence in the student as he had been extremely shy. His participation in the German lesson, at least, has increased impressively.
- They seemed to have realized the terms monolingual, bilingual and multilingual. This was proved all together through specific activities, that took place this school year during the German lesson, related to the theme of "family".

The students of this research changed educational level in September 2022, and they attend secondary education, more specifically, junior high school. After a discussion with the headteacher of the school, it became obvious to the researcher that neither he nor the new teachers at the school are aware of the heritage language of the bilingual students. The researcher informed the headteacher about the cultural diversity in this particular class. Specifically, a small discussion was made about student G., who seems to have learning disorders. Although his mother was present at a recent school meeting and she has frequent communication with the school, the headteacher was not aware either of the heritage country of the mother (Peru) or the languages that are spoken at home. The same conclusion was made after a discussion with the math/geography teacher, who said to me "*The other day was the mother here and we discussed about G; she didn't tell me anything*" («Τις προάλλες ήταν η μαμά εδώ και συζητούσαμε για τον G. δε μου είπε κάτι»). That is, she had no idea about the parents' heritage and the home languages. Then, she said to me "*How*

can they help him then?" (i.e., with the school assignments). In another conversation, the Greek Language and Literature teacher did not know that student D. was born in Germany, and grew up and went to school there until the age of seven. The same was assumed for other students with a migrant background.

Culture, however, is recognized as "a significant heritage of values, knowledge, and skills that can empower people to enrich their identities", according to Palaiologou/Zembylas [17] (p. 7). All those facts, mentioned above, strengthen the argument that every school community, including the school staff and the headteacher, has the duty to be aware of the cultural background of each student. Only then can they contribute positively by implementing actions which promote diversity in schools.

5. Discussion and Further Perspectives

It is more than necessary to conduct future research on family language policy issues. It is a growing research field that refers to "parents' explicit or implicit family language planning for language use between family members" [18] (p. 55) and is extremely significant for understanding students' attitudes towards multilingualism and plurilingualism.

Multilingualism is a prerequisite for school language learning [19] (p. 121), as many students do not grow up with one language and are considered as "marginalized" in the school system. Language education should take account of all the languages present in a given educational context and help learners develop integrated plurilingual repertoires and intercultural awareness.

Teachers' language awareness is necessary for multilingualism to be considered an asset [20]. Are teachers really aware of how to help students transfer their previous knowledge in language learning? It is essential that, in particular, foreign language teachers acquire the skills to implement projects or smaller activities in the class to familiarize students with linguistic diversity.

Marginalized identities (by race, gender, class, sexuality, or nation) should find their space in class and be reclaimed in the learning process in any way. New and relevant curricula towards critical pedagogy have to play a crucial role here, bringing students' realities into society's knowledge [21] (p. 17). The Institute of Educational Policy in Greece (I.E.P.), in replacing the old curricula with the New Curricula ("Νέα Προγράμματα Σπουδών") in almost all subjects from preschool education to upper secondary education, shows a significant approach to a more democratic learning process, respecting any kind of diversity.

Lastly, it is important to note that human rights and citizenship education should be at the forefront of a common educational policy in each country. There is a great need to empower students to "acquire a global, cosmopolitan view" [17] (p. 2), and to have an intercultural understanding about diversity of any kind. "Cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. In this sense, it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations" according to the UNESCO Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity (2002) [22].

Intercultural understanding and respect for linguistic diversity in class is a continuous process and requires the participation of all: school principals, family, and educators. Therefore, school communities must play a critical role not only in respecting cultural and linguistic diversity but also in creating the appropriate conditions in that direction.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was approved by the Teachers' Board of the school (protocol code 10 and date of approval 4 February 2022) and has the written parental consent of the students involved.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data is unavailable due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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