

Teaching English to Refugees in Greece: The Case of Lexena School

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Abstract

In the last year Greece has experience an influx of refugees, this has been associated with forces having a highly destructive character, resulting in a continuing transformation of existing notions concerning the proper forms of teaching and boundaries of such fundamental phenomena as culture and education. Integration processes have also involved dramatic changes in national education systems, which are currently facing a number of considerable challenges. The aim of this paper is to examine the current practices of language teaching in refugee schools, report on the challenges teachers and students encounter, as well as suggest possible ways of facing them. It reports on a research project in a secondary refuge school in Greece. The strategy of research applied in this study is grounded on theory and the qualitative methods of research are: structured interviews (10 interviews done and transcribed during one month), scaled questionnaires were distributed (80 done during one month and transcribed) and photography (800 photos done during one month and described) and repeated visits in the school. There were at least 80 students involved at the project during six months. Moreover this presentation draws on content analysis as a systematic, rigorous approach to analyzing documents obtained or generated in the course of research. The paper will conclude on how barriers and challenges can be met and will suggest practical, uncomplicated advice for teachers on how best to support children who have experienced trauma and what they can do to help vulnerable children learn and develop their full potential.

Keywords: refugee, English language teaching, special refugee schools, teaching in challenging circumstances

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Introduction

In an increasingly globalized and multilingual world, contemporary trends in migration, as well as historically high numbers of forced displacement, have created challenges for the educational systems in destination countries, as children from a variety of linguistic and educational backgrounds join mainstream schools or study in refugee camp schools. Approximately one in 30 (3.4 per cent) of the world's population are migrants (United Nations, 2017). Reasons for their migration to a new country vary, and include a shortage of labor in certain sectors, the desire to join family members living elsewhere, or, as refugees, to escape war, civil unrest and/or poverty (INHCR 2017). While most refugees remain close to their home country – according to UNHCR (2017), migration to more prosperous and peaceful countries continues to grow (Simpson, 2016). Consequently, the proportion of 'students with an immigrant background' now constitutes over 12 per cent of the world's school population (OECD, 2015: 1). Language plays an important role in adjusting to the new environment (De Jong 2010; Ward et al. 2001). The newcomer's task, however, of adapting to life in a new country is often complicated by the need to acquire a new language. Obviously, language is not the only concern of refugees in their new environment; however, one measure of refugees' overall success in adapting to their new environment is the extent to which they are successful in learning the language of their host country (Sharples 2016). In Greece, over one in six children are studying through the medium of EAL, English as an additional language, meaning "students that use two or more languages in their everyday life" (Hall 2018:12), a figure that has risen by 20 per cent since 2006 (Department for Education, 2016). Hence, students studying in the same institution may vary not only in terms of their geographical origin and language background, but also in terms of their educational history and experience, levels of literacy in their own or main language(s), and immigration status and reasons for migration. Moreover, the Greek government, in order to cater for the increased needs of a growing number of refugee children, has established more than 100 hundred refuge schools, called DYEP (structures for welcoming and educating refugee children).

The aim of this paper is to examine the challenges and problems that emerge from teaching English to DYEP schools. This article is written from the scope of those teaching this diverse group of adults and children in such schools; in a country/area where Greek is often the dominant language, of a substantial, often monolingual, majority and where learners need English to communicate in their everyday life. Underlining the need to extend the boundaries of the discipline of EAL to include teaching-learning in less privileged contexts, this paper will emerge in describing the current situation in refugee camp schools as well as identify the obstacles faced by teachers who work in these schools. The paper will also present multiple ways of thinking about how to overcome the existing challenges, generate an insight and develop understanding of teacher experiences. Finally it will give a description of different classroom activities and instructional strategies the teachers employed in their classroom with newcomer refugee children.

1. Refuge schools (DEYP)

The Greek Educational system entitles all students in the state funded education to experience the same processes and curriculum 'irrespective of ethnicity, language

background, culture, gender, ability, social background, sexuality, or religion’ (Ministry of Education 1990). Consequently, students with EAL are taught in ‘mainstream’ classrooms alongside their non-EAL peers, in an effort to ensure equality of provision. However, it was observed that the policy of the Ministry has led to challenges for bilingual students and their teachers alike underlined in almost every teachers report. Teachers argued that from the policy perspective, language is not seen as a barrier to achievement. Also Greek teachers pinpointed that the EAL is not taken into consideration as a new element and contributing factor in the class. These reports are also in line with the literature regarding refugee education, that also characterize such policies as having ‘a very marginal and Cinderella-like status within the school system’ (Leung 2001 *ibid*:33). In effect, while national policy guides schools to promote a culture of inclusion and respect within the curriculum, schools (and the local authorities which support them) have to interpret and implement national guidelines regarding EAL for themselves.

Moreover, Greece in the last 4 years has experienced a large increase in the number of refugees arriving to the country, most of whom wish to reach more prosperous countries and feeling trapped in the host country (fig1.). As a result of this substantial increase, the existing school teachers and administrators, strongly proclaimed with every means they had, that could not meet the needs of these children effectively. Although most of the students were incorporated in mainstream schools, the need to establish schools units and new foundations that could meet effectively the demands of this diverse student population was strongly protested.

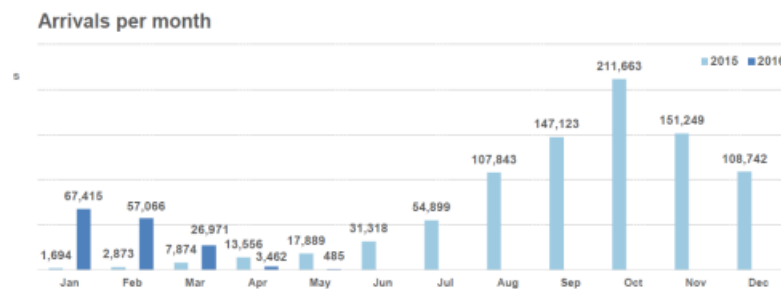


Fig1. Arrivals of refugees in Greek islands (2015-2016). Πηγή: UNHCR, “UNHCR Data portal, Greece-Greece data snapshot, 08 May 2016”, 08.05.2016

The Greek ministry of education therefore, moved on to forming new educational forms, called DYEP, within the existing school units. In October 2016 the first 10 DYEP units were in operation and until May 2017 107 units were established. More than 145 DYEP exist now in Greece, both for secondary and primary education (FEK 38/ 4415/2016, A’ 159, Ministry of education 2016), the distribution of the units are shown in the map below (fig2).

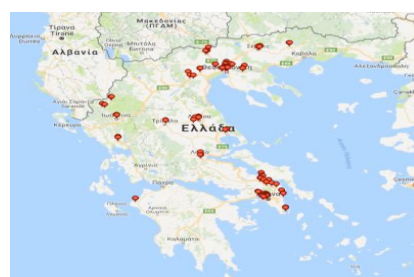


Fig2. Working DEYP units, Greece (March 2017). Ministry of Education

According to the law DYEP units, will operate after school hours, from 14.00 to 18.00 and for 20 hour per week. The schools that would operate as DYEP schools in the afternoon were selected based on their proximity to the refuge camps. The subject lessons that would be available were Greek Language (6 hours), English (4 hours), Math (3 hours) Physical education (3hours), IT (3 hours) Art (2hours). The ministry considered that within these units, refuge children would feel safe and, not only would be well prepared to join the mainstream schools after a year if they wished to stay in the host country, but also that they could be given adequate qualifications if they left the country.

Research Methodology

2.1 DEYP Lexena: School context and Student background

The project explored the school experiences of secondary-level students who speak EAL and the experiences, approaches and practices of their English Teachers. Taking a case-study approach, it focused on EAL speakers studying in DYEP Lexena, the only DYEP school in Peloponese, South West of Greece responsible for almost 250 students. The **background** of the students varied: A small percentage 5% came to Greece as permanent migrants with extended family networks; a considerable 90% came to the Greece for long periods but it was unclear as to whether they are 'permanent' migrants or not and have arrived as a result of forced migration or displacement, as refugees, asylum seekers, and whose status within Greece must be resolved. Furthermore, the **age** at which children arrived in Greece is also varied. A 40% was young children 7-11, while a 60% was 11-18 years old. Here, we must point that official records of exact age did not exist, for the majority of the students, in the school. Consequently the age groups were mostly formed according to the age the students or parents claimed. EAL students' **proficiency in English** also varied, while EAL speakers, by their very nature, speak at least one other language at home (usually the language of their parents' country of origin), some may speak only one other language and English, others were proficient in more than one language other than English, some also have learned the language of a previous host country, usually Turkish, before arriving in Greece. Furthermore, growing up in a multilingual home or community developed children's ability and willingness to switch between languages, a further attribute that they bring into the school environment (Anderson et al., 2016), although one which is often not readily recognized in Greek schools. Studies have shown(Gillborn, 1995, Anderson 2016) , that this varying level of language proficiency affects not only their ability to access the curriculum and reach their academic potential, but can also impede the social skills students must poses to operate in the school setting. Furthermore, students different in their *own-language literacy*, which posed, further with implications for their development of English language literacy. Meanwhile, differing parental proficiency in English and attitudes towards English *also* affected English language Teaching. Approximately equal numbers of boys and girls participated in the study. Efforts were also made to work with students drawn from a range of ages and countries, however the small sample size of the participants and their diverse language level and background, mean that the study's participants are illustrative rather than representative.

2.2 Research questions and design

The study approached a mixed-methods research design, which explored students' daily own perception of their English language experience and needs. Also the study explored their English teachers' perceptions of the students' needs, obstacles and priorities. Qualitative data was therefore collected through questionnaires filled by EAL students, interviews with teachers and the school principal, classroom observation and field notes. Moreover, visual methods were employed in the study. Pictures of the visual messages, written on the school premises and equipment (chairs, desks etc) by refugee and Greek students, who also used the same equipment in the morning classes were taken. These pictures revealed, a hidden dialogue within these two groups, which was of great interest. Moreover, the generation of these three kinds of data enabled an in depth analysis, and alleviated the impact of the limitations of interviews and the 'observer's paradox' during observation when any of these methods are conducted in isolation. The aim of the data collection was to focus on participant meanings and interpretations of school life and learning, where understanding of the needs and obstacles derive from the fieldwork and data (Dornyei, 2007: 131).

The following research questions informed the project:

1. What are the barriers and problems EAL students face in the English language class
2. To what extent do the students feel free to express and develop their own identity
3. What are the implications for the English teachers in relation to the students' needs and demands.
4. What good practices should be employed for learning English to be more effective.

2.3 Data Collection

The researchers informed the school principal and received parental consent in order to have students fill in the questionnaires. This meant that, the researcher clearly explained the aims of the study to the principal in a personal meeting, who in his turn informed the parents and distributed the parental consent form. The principal received himself the parental consent forms signed by the parents or care takers.

Then, the school was visited for a period of 4 weeks. The first week the focus was in building trust among the researchers and the participants both teachers and students. Also, during the first week pictures of the school visual messages, both formally or informally placed, were taken after school hours to ensure that there will not be students' faces in any pictures. The second and third week involved data gathering and observation of English lessons given in all age groups.

2.4 Data analysis

The 3 sets of data were examined together and categorized to find similarities and contrasts of concerns within the participants (student to student, teacher to student, teacher to teacher, teacher to principal, visual analysis). However, we must recognize that our project examined only a specific refugee school in a specific context and caution is needed concerning how far our findings can be used and generalized.

Regarding the ethics of the study we must point that throughout the study, attention was paid to ethical issues and prior consent from the Ministry's of Education Ethic committee was taken. The committee examined and approved the methods and questions of the study. The study's aims and processes were explicitly outlined to the committee and anonymity of the subjects and confidentiality were of major concern and attention by the researchers.

3. Findings

Our study tried to find the answer to the key question "How can learning English in refuge schools be improved and how EAL students experience this language learning. Clearly as a case study the data is just a snapshot of these issues in this particular school context. However, there was a considerable consensus between participants, who raised several key issues that need to be worked upon.

First and foremost the issue that both teachers and students raised was, the fact that there is instability regarding the status of the students; will they stay in Greece. This issue frustrated both teachers and students and was a matter of great conflict and anxiety that kept coming up almost in every class. Moreover in DEYP school were appointed teachers with few teaching hours, meaning a very limited salary. As a result English teachers felt unsatisfied with the money they earned in relation to the work load they had to undertake in these challenging circumstances. Also issues of them moving to other mainstream schools made them, caused further frustration since their work would not have the continuity the teachers hoped for. Furthermore, issues of not adequate training of the English teachers to teach in such learning environments was also recurrent in every teacher researcher interview.

Administrative issues were also found since the laws had to be quickly designed to cater for the new needs that several unclear points, were causes of further frustration and conflict both among teachers but also among teachers and students.

A major in our opinion point that needs to be addressed is the lack of cooperation between the morning schools and the DEYP schools. The English teachers of the two schools did not meet and did not cooperate enough as to design their lessons and organize their material. This made the DEYP English teacher feel alone, but also made the children feel as outcast and inferiors since they did not even meet with the Greek students at school. As the analysis of visual however, revealed both refuge and Greek students felt the need of meeting and interacting. Both groups left messages ,usually of music and questions to be answered by the next group that would use the same equipment. Most commonly messages of "which football team you support" or "music you like" were scripted on the desks using English as a medium of communication. We must mention that hatred messages or insulting messages related mostly to religion, race, sexuality were found however there were only scarce.

The issues students most commonly raised were issues of "fitting in", and not understanding the new culture of teaching. An interesting point is, that most students felt happy and more confident in the English language class, since they could understand and participate more actively in the lesson. They suggested that they encountered very fewer even no language difficulties in their studies in English

language. Challenges of managing the classroom, giving clear instructions, and more generally making the curriculum understood was a central concern of the teachers and students. Finally, finding appropriate material and issues of not knowing the culture and cultural restrictions of the students were central concern of teachers too. Most teachers felt intimidated when students used their first language in class. While students considered this as a good strategy to reduce anxiety and boost self esteem.

4. Recommendations

The question how can an English teacher best prepare himself/herself to successfully teach EAL and refugee students is not easy to answer. Having highlighted the many difficulties facing refugee children and having experienced good classroom practices by the aforementioned English teachers we will briefly try to make some recommendations. First of all teachers must keep in mind that students bring with them specific education related experiences. As a result, refugee children may have gaps in their skills and knowledge drawing upon their disrupted schooling and not due to lack of skills or aptitude. Moreover, refugee children may be exposed to multiple language instruction through the course of their migration, resulting in language confusion and limited opportunities to master academic content. Careful attention is needed to identify educational needs as opposed to innate capacities for learning. A further point is to keep in mind that refugee students may be influenced by prior experiences of discrimination by the authorities, which may affect their relationships with the teachers or peers. Therefore of major concern of the teacher is to try and establish a calm, collaborative and safe environment for those children, although it may seem difficult. Teachers should first try to find the students' needs and language level. Then combining good practices from general ELT training and combine them with material easily accessible and downloadable from UNHR site UNESCO and British council site, that have uploaded material for every age groups. Then carefully design of their lessons should follow so as not to use material that may be considered offensive or have cultural obstacles. Being informed and learn more about the culture and ethics of your class can assist the teacher in feeling more confident when interacting with material and while trying to choose material to use in their classes. Create a community where the student feels secure and catered for in invaluable for effective learning to take place. Teachers found particularly interesting and helpful working on projects about immigrant students' culture that later presented in special designed events to students of the morning school and their parents. Such projects were welcome by the immigrant students who started feeling as part of the community, as well assisted them in forming bonds with the morning class students with whom they might be in the same school the next year. Also it triggered interest and offers of help from the local community and authorities. This in turn had many practical issues that the teachers had to deal with solved by volunteers. An enlightening experience for teachers was a visit to the refugee camp where the students were living. That visit organized by the principal gave teacher a bigger picture on what are the circumstances and standards of living of those children and showed the potential source of many behavioral issues that were present in the classes. Teachers were more aware and more encouraged to go back to working hard. They also found themselves feeling relieved, since due to the fact that most of them had little or no teaching experience in such schools, caused them a feeling of inadequacy and as result retreat. Teaching in such challenging school environments and working with students that have experienced traumatic experiences requires extensive and

ongoing training for the English Teachers as well as well-organized and systematic planning from the Ministry. Further investigation into these key questions is necessary, which, alongside with more research projects on such issues are also vital. Finding time for teachers and school EAL leads to talk to EAL students in their own institutions, in order to uncover their varied experiences and perspectives, the challenges faced and the ways in which EAL students from all backgrounds and of all proficiencies can lead to better results of teaching and ensure a smooth inclusion/transition of the immigrant students.

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