

Roula Tsokalidou
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece



Synergies Sud-Est européen n° 1 - 2008
pp. 73-83

Abstract : *This paper presents the results of a research project involving bilingual children in selected primary schools in Volos, Greece, focusing, mainly, on the findings that have led to the proposal of two class activities, with the aim of promoting « bilingual awareness » in primary schools. The activities are the creation of « The bilingual portrait » and the use of the children's book titled « My first book on bilingualism », which was produced in order to help teachers in their efforts to raise awareness in relation to bilingualism in their multilingual classes. The research project in question took place during the school year 2002-2003, while co-operation with some of the teachers involved still continues, as the implementation of the research findings necessitates on-going efforts to turn theoretical issues on bilingualism into specific classroom activities.*

Both « The bilingual portrait » and « My first book on bilingualism », initiatives and practices suitable for first and second grade primary school children, provide an opportunity for teachers, children and parents alike to realize some of the important benefits of our multilingual Greek reality, both in and outside the school environment.

Key words : *advantages of bilingualism, bilingual awareness, classroom activities, multiculturalism*

Résumé : *Il s'agit de données concernant une recherche menée dans les écoles primaires de Volos pendant les années 2002-2003. Dans ce type d'écoles, le bilinguisme des élèves a révélé la nécessité de promouvoir une prise de conscience de cet état de fait avec la mise en place de pratiques éducatives et l'utilisation d'ouvrages pour enfants tels que « My first book on bilingualism » ainsi que « Le profil de l'enfant bilingue ».*

Mots-clés : *avantages du bilinguisme, éveil au bilinguisme, activités de classe, multiculturalité*

Introduction

Bilingual phenomena in the Greek social and school settings have started to be noticed and studied mainly over the last decade, as Greece has changed from being a country of exporting migrants to being a country of receiving immigrants from many parts of the world. Politicians, academics and teachers have proposed

and implemented various educational measures in order to accommodate the needs of children and adults from non-Greek speaking backgrounds with various levels of success. The Greek educational system, as any other in similar circumstances, is being challenged, as the multilingual school context requires the rethinking and redefining of everyday school practices.

Research in language contact and bilingualism in Greece concerns both language and education researchers. Evidence to this provides the work of Greek researchers such as Σκούρτου (1997, 2002) Δαμανάκης (2002), Γκότοβος (2002), Τσιάκαλος (2000) and Γκόβαρης (2001), who come from either linguistic or pedagogical research backgrounds. Moreover, the variety of definitions, proposed by experts in the field of language contact, point to the fact 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 (Baker, 2000). Although for this paper, we do not need to expand on all the proposed types, definitions and parameters of bilingualism, it is important to keep in mind the complexities involved as we tend to ignore them in our approach and understanding of our bilingual students in the Greek educational context, who are often treated as a homogeneous and static group.

The research project: structure and methods

In an attempt to assist primary school teachers in their efforts to deal with the co-existence of non-native and native speakers of Greek in their classes, a research team from the Department of Primary School Education of the University of Thessaly, under the supervision of the author, embarked on the project “Making the best of school multilingualism through the teaching of language, literature and history”, whose structure and main findings in relation to language are presented in the first part of this paper. The findings of our research led to the proposal of several school activities, the most important of whom are “The bilingual portrait” and a children’s book on bilingualism, titled *My first book on bilingualism*. The aims and content of both these initiatives are presented in the second part of this paper. Through the use of the proposed activities, we intend to help raise “bilingual awareness” for all parties involved. The notion of “bilingual awareness” will be also discussed in the second part of the paper.

Accepting the premise 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., within the context of the project in question, we proposed activities that necessitate the co-operation of students and teachers, as well as students, parents and communities. Our own previous research (Clyne, et al, 1994 : 163) has shown that the participation of community members in the school activities contributes positively to the linguistic or bilingual development of primary school children. The recognition of the influence of the children’s reality, home and community life, 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, as we mentioned earlier, can only function in a positive and empowering manner.

For the research project in question, we selected three primary schools at Volos, which, according to the official records available to us, had a high proportion of children from non Greek-speaking backgrounds. We decided to carry out our research in two classes in three primary schools, so as to study them more closely in the time that was available to us, that is during one school year. We selected the second and fourth grades in each school, after contacting the teachers involved and considering the fact that we would have a sample of younger and older students, respectively, who would still be in the same schools in the following school year, with the hope that we would be able to follow their progress. The classes of the three selected schools had the following proportion of bilingual and monolingual students:

PS1

Class B: 4/22 students (Albanian background)

Class D: 5/17 students (3 Albanian and 1 Rom background)

PS2

Class B: 6/22 students (4 Albanian, 1 Rom, 1 Rumanian background)

Class D: 4/17 students (3 Albanian, 1 Rom background)

PS3

Class B: 3/20 students (2 Albanian, 1 Rumanian background)

Class D: 1/11 students (Albanian background)

The research method that was employed for the purposes of the project was observation of classes during the whole of the school year and the conduction of interviews with some teachers and students, once the research team became familiar with them. More than 15 one or two-hour visits took place, involving each time two members of the research team, who later reported on the class activities. Thus, we became aware of the teachers' and students' level of awareness of bilingual issues and drew some preliminary conclusions that helped us propose certain educational tools that would help raise such awareness.

Main findings of the research project.

One important issue that led us to the creation of “The bilingual portrait” activity and the booklet *My first book on Bilingualism*, which we will discuss in the next section of this paper, has been the terminology used by educators, administrators and many researchers in order to define non-native or bilingual children in Greek classes. More often than not, the term “alloglossa pedia” (that is, “other language-speaking children”) is used as an umbrella term to describe all children whose native language is not Greek.

As we got to know the non-native children in the three schools in question, we realized that such a term is both unsuitable and limiting for children who are

all from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, with varying degrees of Greek language competence, all of whom were actively, passively or potentially bilingual. 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 behavior is *bilingual children*. This change in the terminology used has both ideological and educational dimensions, as it suggests a positive and empowering attitude towards children of non-Greek background, both within and outside the school context. The term “bilingual” gives emphasis to the linguistic repertoire and potential of children and eliminates the stigma attached to the static label “alloglossa” (that is, “other language-speaking”). Last but not least, the promotion of bilingual primary school children may encourage native Greek-speaking children to acquire other languages and become bilingual as well.

The teachers’ general lack of awareness of bilingual issues became further apparent as they did not bring up in their classes any issues related to the other languages and cultures that were represented by their bilingual students. Where inadequacies in the use of Greek were found, they were, mostly, attributed to the lack of parental support in their homework and the lack of bilingual student participation in class activities. Through discussions with teachers, it became apparent that they did not believe that the use of L1 at home would have any positive impact on the development of L2 for bilingual children, which is directly opposite to the documented necessity for educators to build on the children’s home languages in order for them to have better chances to develop both linguistically and cognitively (Cummins, 2000). On the contrary, they would claim that they often advise migrant parents to use Greek at home, in order to promote their children’s competence in the language of schooling. Moreover, researchers noted that when spare class time did exist, most teachers would spend it on more reading aloud.

Another important finding of our research in relation to the student immigrants from Albania, has been the fact that, in our discussions with them, the majority would initially claim that they only speak Greek at home and hence they do not know Albanian. However, as we got to know each other better and they realized that the researchers considered bilingualism an asset, they would acknowledge that, after a few years of residence in Greece, they still have some knowledge of Albanian and they would write some words in their other language, upon request.

To conclude the first part of the paper, our small scale, qualitative study showed us that Greek teachers need support in becoming themselves more aware of the educational and social issues related to bilingualism, as well as in developing and implementing class activities with the aim of promoting bilingual and intercultural issues for their students in their multilingual and multicultural classes. Moreover, all children would benefit even more if such activities were made familiar and shared by bilingual and monolingual parents alike.

Proposed school practices of raising “bilingual awareness”

The findings of the research project that were presented in the first part of this paper led us to the proposal of a series of class activities and practices that would assist both teachers and students to develop what we have called “bilingual awareness”, regardless of whether they, themselves, are bilingual or not.

The notion of “bilingual awareness” has been inspired by some of the well-known advantages of bilingualism, as proposed by Baker (2000), especially those whose repercussions go beyond the bilingual child or person per se and affect our social context. Thus, we can be bilingually aware without, necessarily, being bilingual. This can be achieved through the acknowledgement of what Baker (2000 : 12) categorizes as communication and cultural advantages of bilingualism. In more detail, wider communication, deeper multilingualism and greater tolerance towards people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds are beneficial to all and not only to bilinguals per se. Having bilingual students and children in our classes and communities, respectively, cannot but contribute to a richer, more colorful, diverse and dynamic environment that enables us to get to know other lifestyles and experiences and benefit from them. However, it became apparent through our research that, currently, such diversity is more often than not treated indifferently, if not negatively, with the result of bilingual children, mainly from an Albanian cultural and linguistic background, often hiding or “forgetting”, as they claim, their home languages.

In the context of the Greek classroom, we are convinced that, through the systematic promotion of bilingualism and the encouragement of intercultural exchange among students from various backgrounds, both bilinguals and monolinguals will be benefited and enriched. One step towards this goal can be made through “The bilingual portrait” activity and the use of the proposed children’s booklet *My first book on bilingualism*, which we will present below.

The bilingual portrait

The activity of “The bilingual portrait” has been inspired by the research finding that bilingual children in Greek classes are characterized as “alloglossa” (that is, “other language-speaking”), as we discussed in the first part of this paper. We observed the paradox that although these children were described as “other language-speaking”, the children themselves often claimed that they have forgotten their “other” home language.

In order for us, the teachers and the rest of the class to get to know these children better, we decided to create an individual portrait of each bilingual child with information on their languages, countries of origin, home and community environments, their own views on Greece, their country of origin and their school experiences as they themselves describe them. All this information, gathered by the researchers with the co-operation of the bilingual students, their teachers and parents, was then put together on a board that included photos, pictures and drawings made by the children themselves. The bilingual children and their parents gladly agreed to participate in this activity and gave

their consent to us to publicly display their portraits upon completion.

The original idea was to put together as many such portraits as possible during the school year and display them at the end of the school year in every school. Since by the time these portraits were ready, the school activities had already been formalized, we presented some of the portraits from every school at an open University conference, organized in cooperation with the schools, at the end of the academic year, where a few bilingual children with their parents and teachers attended. The reactions of the bilingual children to the display of their portraits to academics and teachers was indeed very encouraging and our overall impression was that they all felt proud of becoming the center of attention for one day.

A sample of a few bilingual portraits is presented below:

Robena's portrait	
Name:	Robena
Age:	10
Grade:	4 th grade
Father:	Ilias (technician)
Mother:	Monda (home-carer)
Siblings:	two brothers, aged 5 and 1
Country of Origin:	Albania
Years in Greece:	4 years

About her two countries:

She likes to visit Albania in the summer but prefers to live in Greece.

About her two languages:

At home she speaks mainly Albanian with her mother and mainly Greek with her father. The same holds for her brothers. She cannot read and write in Albanian and prefers to read Greek literature.

Her interests:

She likes to play the organ and the piano, especially the song "Happy Birthday". She prefers Greek music but her parents mostly listen to Albanian songs. She also likes cooking.

At school:

She spends most time with her three cousins (all girls) but also has three Greek girlfriends.

Her teacher about Robena:

“Robena is diligent, has some problems at spelling and is mostly interested in language. She is good at maths, solves problems and asks questions. She is polite, friendly and eager to be helpful to others”.

Her schoolmates about Robena:

“Robena is nice, a little forgetful but that is ok”.

“Robena is a little mean and very good and stingy”.

Apart from the information above, Robena’s portrait includes photos of all family members and a long list of words in Albanian, written with Greek characters, with their Greek translation.

Elda’s portrait	
Name:	Elda
Age:	13
Grade:	4 th grade
Father:	Bendri (farmer)
Mother:	Violeta (farmer)
Siblings:	one brother, 17 years old
Country of Origin:	Albania
Years in Greece:	3 years

About her two countries:

In Albania she and her family lived in a beautiful house with flowers and animals. Their house in Greece is smaller but pretty. Her only reason for visiting Albania is to see her grandparents and relatives. She likes Greece more because she likes the people and her school.

About her two languages:

At home her parents speak Albanian but she often does not understand some Albanian words. With her brother she speaks Greek. With her schoolmates from Albania, they speak Albanian to one another.

Her interests:

She likes to read stories, watching television and playing hide and seek in the neighborhood.

At school:

In the beginning the other students did not play with her and she used to cry. Now she has a few good friends and she is happy.

Elda’s portrait also includes photos of her family and a drawing she made to express her feelings about the time her family first came to Greece. The drawing depicts children playing at school and herself sitting alone on a bench crying.

The sketchy presentation of the portraits of Robena and Elda above can only give us a general idea of the lives of the two bilingual children between Albania and Greece. What is more important than that, however, is the process of familiarization and the exchange of experiences and knowledge between the researchers and the bilingual children preceded the final product. Although this cannot easily be documented, as it has to do with the development of mutual trust and sympathy over time, it is the main reason why we propose this activity to educators for their own multilingual and multicultural classes. In the current school year we aim to propose to interested teachers to carry out the activity of “The bilingual portrait” in the form of a project that would involve monolingual and bilingual children working in pairs or groups with the supervision and guidance of the teacher. We strongly believe that the process of getting to know the ideas, experiences and languages of one’s schoolmates gradually during the school year will be more beneficial to all than more reading aloud, as our research showed that some teachers often do in order to fill spare class time.

My first book on bilingualism

The second main product of our research efforts to promote bilingual awareness, as we mentioned earlier, was the creation of a children’s book on bilingualism. The book was mainly inspired by the research finding that educators do not seem to be aware of the importance of maintaining the children’s home languages, especially in the case of Albanian and Rom background children, whose home languages and cultures are socially stigmatized and undervalued in contemporary Greek society (Swadener, Tressou & Mytakidou, 2001). Instead, as we mentioned previously in this paper, they often advise migrant parents to use Greek at home and express the complaint that bilingual children do not have parental support in their homework.

The children’s book has been, so far, written bilingually in the following pairs of languages: Greek-Albanian, Greek-Russian, Greek-Arabic and Greek-English. It is the first of a proposed series of children’s books on bilingualism and can be employed both in class by teachers and students and at home in order to encourage all children, teachers and parents to find out how widespread and important bilingualism is. It is illustrated by bilingual and monolingual preschool and primary school students, some of whom, through their pictures, express their feelings about their two languages/countries.

The book begins with a short introduction for teachers. The introduction discusses the notion of “bilingual awareness”, based on the documented advantages of bilingualism, and encourages the teachers to include issues of language contact, migration and bilingualism in their teaching content. It also explains the structure of the booklet and encourages them to adapt and supplement it according to the needs of their students.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part is mainly theoretical and gives simple definitions of child bilingualism, i.e. the ability to speak different languages with one’s parents or in different contexts and “advertises” the

ability to know other languages in terms of intercultural communication, traveling and making friends. The second part is interactive as it encourages the children to learn some words in another language and fill them in or to write some words in the other language that they already know. If they prefer, the children can draw something instead. The third part of the book, which we have called “intercultural”, aims to raise bilingual awareness by bringing forward the linguistic pluralism of our society (“*In our world people speak many languages...All languages are useful and good. Some ... are spoken by people who live in the same neighborhood or go to the same school as you*”). It closes with an attempt to put theory into practice by inviting children to ask from other children in their neighborhood and school to offer them a word from their languages. The conclusion is that these words from other languages are “*a gift that does not cost any money but has great value ... Because: when you teach me another language, you teach me to think in another manner, you open a window into your life for me, you open your heart to me...Thank you*”.

In first and second grade Greek classes, most teachers have three-hour sessions weekly in which they can teach any theme they choose to in a flexible manner, without having to adhere to a specific school program. Within this “flexible school zone” we propose to teachers to adopt certain activities around the issue of bilingualism. We are convinced that the use of the proposed little children’s book, in combination with classroom discussions and other activities initiated by teachers and bilingual children, will help create a more positive attitude towards migrant children and their other languages in Greek classes.

Giving emphasis on bilingualism and striving to raise children’s awareness of bilingual phenomena will help create an intercultural educational context that will benefit the whole of the class. Moreover, especially for language groups with a low social status (such as, presently, the Albanian community in Greece), the use of the book at home will also help parents realize the importance of helping their children develop bilingually and, in the long run, such a conviction may impact positively on their own self-esteem as speakers of socially weak languages.

Teachers, on the other hand, are encouraged to acknowledge the importance of bringing their students’ other languages to the school classroom, in order to enable the latter to build on their existing linguistic resources, as well as to assist them in developing more self-respect as children from migrant backgrounds of low social status. We presume that if teachers, becoming more bilingually aware, adapt, to some extent, the content of their teaching to the needs of their bilingual students and their communities, through activities, discussions and practices that draw upon migrant communities, migrant parents may become more involved with their children’s homework, as their own experiences will become more meaningful for both the teachers and the whole of the class.

At this stage, the children’s book on bilingualism has been welcome by a good number of primary school teachers, who has started using it in their classes, and we are looking for more teachers who are willing to use the book and involve their students in the proposed activities, in order for us to have the necessary feedback from the school community. Once it becomes accepted as a useful tool by teachers and parents in multilingual schools, especially, but definitely not only, in the context of Greek primary schools, other books, suitable for older

students, with more demanding activities, may be produced, in order to assist teachers in creating positive multilingual and multicultural school settings.

Conclusion

Our small-scale research in Greek primary schools has documented a lack of teachers' awareness of issues related to bilingualism as well as to the bilingual students' social and educational needs. Moreover, it has become apparent to us that teachers and policy makers do not take the time to look into the individual realities of bilingual children and develop educational practices that encourage intercultural exchange between monolingual and bilingual students.

On the other hand, we are convinced that although bilingualism is a relatively new phenomenon in the Greek society and school, it has advantages for all students, teachers, parents and communities, which are yet to be discovered. The acknowledgement of the social, cultural, communicative and ideological parameters of bilingualism that extend beyond individuals to the school and society that bilinguals contribute to create has been described and termed as "bilingual awareness".

In order to help educators become more bilingually aware themselves, as well as enable them to encourage their students to benefit from their own or their schoolmates' bilingual realities, within the context of the multicultural Greek school setting, we proposed two practices in this direction.

"The bilingual portrait" constitutes an attempt for students and teachers to become familiar with the views, ideas, realities and linguistic behaviour of bilingual children, some of which may or may not differ from those of monolinguals, thus encouraging both parties involved to reach a higher appreciation of the complexities and uniqueness of each bilingual student. *My first book on bilingualism* aims to help students, teachers and parents, better appreciate the advantages of bilingualism, while involving both monolingual and bilingual children in activities of intercultural exchange. Once the acquisition of bilingual awareness becomes a priority for teachers, we are certain that the manner in which these activities will be adapted to suit the needs of every class will yield the best social and educational benefits possible.

We believe that, as Tollefson (1991) states, it is impossible to adopt a neutral or objective attitude towards linguistic heterogeneity and bilingualism, since the linguistic policy that we opt for shapes, one way or another, the world in which we choose to live. On a macro-social level, we are convinced that raising the bilingual awareness of teachers, bilingual and monolingual students, parents and communities will help promote a positive broader ideology, both educationally and socially, that will help lead our modern multicultural societies to the recognition that linguistic pluralism is a unique asset, "*a gift that does not cost any money but has great value*".

Notes

¹ The above paper, with very few changes, has been published in the *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 2008, vol : 8,1, 48-61.

Bibliographie

- Baker, C. 2000. *The care and education of bilinguals*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Bloome, D. 1985. «Reading as a social practice». *Language Arts* 62 (2), pp.134-142.
- Clyne, M., Jenkins, C. - Chen, I.Y., Tsokalidou, R., Wallner, T. 1994. *Developing Second Language from Primary School*. Melbourne: NLLIA.
- Cummins, J. 2000. *Language, Power and Pedagogy*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Γκόβαρης, Χ. 2001. *Εισαγωγή στη Διαπολιτισμική Εκπαίδευση*. Αθήνα: Ατραπός.
- Γκότοβος, Α. 2002. *Εκπαίδευση και ετερότητα*. Αθήνα: Μεταίχμιο.
- Δαμανάκης, Μ. 2002. Εισαγωγή του επιμελητή έκδοσης. *Επιστήμες Αγωγής. Διαπολιτισμική Παιδαγωγική στην Ελλάδα. Πρακτικά ζητήματα και θεωρητικά ζητούμενα*. Θεματικό τεύχος 2002, σελ.7-9.
- Σκούρτου, Ε. (επιμ.). 1997. *Θέματα Διγλωσσίας και Εκπαίδευσης*. Αθήνα: νήσος.
- Σκούρτου, Ε. 2002. «Δίγλωσσοι μαθητές στο ελληνικό σχολείο». *Επιστήμες Αγωγής. Διαπολιτισμική Παιδαγωγική στην Ελλάδα. Πρακτικά ζητήματα και θεωρητικά ζητούμενα*. Θεματικό τεύχος 2002. Πανεπιστήμιο Κρήτης, Π.Τ.Δ.Ε., σελ. 12-22.
- Swadener, B., Tressou, E. and Mitakidou, S. 2001. «Involving preservice teachers in a program for Rom (Gypsy) children in Northern Greece: lessons in child advocacy». In Berson, I. R., Berson, M. J. and Cruz, B.C. (eds) *Cross Cultural Perspectives in Child Advocacy*. Greenwich: Information Age Publishing, pp. 189-212.
- Τσιάκαλος, Γ. 2000. *Οδηγός Αντιρατσιστικής Εκπαίδευσης*. Αθήνα: ελληνικά γράμματα.