Abstract

The study was conducted with the aim to specify the EFL teachers’ perceptions of central issues on Multilingual Education Policy, identify their attitudes to early FL learning, and record their suggestions about further developing multilingual education. The sample consisted of 86 EFL teachers employed in state schools in Northern Greece. Semi-structured interviews were used as the basic instrument. The data revealed the EFL teachers’ positive attitudes towards major issues of foreign language policies. However, despite the fact that the influential role of English as a lingua franca was recorded, the need for students to acquire multilingual competence, starting from very young age, was signified by EFL teachers.

Keywords: Multilingualism, EFL teachers, attitudes, multilingual development, primary and secondary education

1. Introduction

The increased interest and growth of research into multilingualism, which has been identified over the last decade, has lead to the development of the field into a new discipline (Kemp, 2009 p.11) in result of the general trend that for the larger part of the world population some form of multilingualism tends to be the norm (Bhatia & Ritchie, 2004). As multilingualism and linguistic diversity have gained ground and become prominent in several parts of the world, official policies have been developed with the aim to realize the emerging demands for language learning and linguistic diversity, which has also been the case in the context of the European Union (Wilton, 2009: 45).

In this direction a strive for multilingualism has been recorded in European educational systems due to the acknowledged significance for all citizens to be able to speak two European languages in addition to their mother tongue, an act identified as the ‘2+1 formula’ (Council of Europe, 1995). Despite the fact that English has been well established in many European countries as the first foreign language, and remains more or less unchallenged in consequence of its influential role as a lingua franca throughout Europe and around the world (Graddol, 2006), learning a lingua franca alone is no longer considered adequate; the development of plurilingual ability is considered as the main prerequisite in a Europe of free movement and intercultural communication (Commission of Europe, 2003).

In line with the Commission’s policy which proclaims the furthering of multilingualism through the educational systems of all member states (Commission of Europe, 2003; Council of Europe, 1995; Grin, 2006), there has been a call for “further action to improve the mastery of basic skills from a very early age” (European Council, 2002). Documents such as the Common European Framework or the European Portfolio (Council of Europe, 2001) reflect
decisions reached concerning the relation between European citizenship and multilingualism. In effect, the development of communicative skills in two foreign languages is considered as a basic competence for individuals, and has been integrated into the education systems of most European countries (Eurydice, 2001; 2005).

In line with the Commission’s general approach to promoting multilingualism, an increasing diversification in the languages taught in Greek primary and secondary educational level has taken place during the last fifteen years. English as a foreign language (FL) has been included in the primary school curriculum from the 3rd grade onward. A FL, which is chosen among the three on offer at this level (English, French, or German), has become compulsory in upper secondary education, since 1998/99 (Griva & Iliadou, 2010). In the school year 2005-2006, the introduction of a second foreign language, either French or German was piloted as a compulsory subject at a number of primary schools from 5th grade onwards (Circular F 52/345/48265/C1/17-5-2005). Furthermore, Italian was introduced as a second foreign language in lower secondary education in 2008 (Circular I 11800/C2/2-9-2008). In September 2010, English as a foreign language was piloted at 800 primary schools in the 1st grade (Decision F12/879/88413/C1-20/7/2010).

2. The study

2.1 The aim and objectives of the study

The present pilot study aimed to provide an account of EFL teachers’ beliefs regarding multilingualism and their attitudes to foreign language learning and teaching in the Greek educational system. In particular, the following research objectives were set: i) to specify the EFL teachers’ perceptions of central issues on Multilingual Education Policy; ii) to identify their attitudes to early foreign language learning; iii) to record their suggestions about further developing multilingual education.

2.2 The participants

The participants involved in the study were 86 EFL teachers employed in state primary (52.3%) and secondary schools (47.7%) in Northern Greece; of them 75.6% are female and 24.4% male. Their teaching experience varied: the least experienced teachers have been working from one to five years (31.4%), a significant percentage (39.5%) had an experience ranging from six to fifteen years, while the most experienced teachers had been teaching foreign languages (FLs) for more than fifteen years (29.1%). It should be noted that a considerable percentage of the participants (38.4%) are highly qualified and hold a Master’s degree.

2.3 Research instruments

Semi-structured interviews were used as the basic research instrument, which comprised the following sections: a) conceptualization of multilingualism, b) multilingual competence of citizens, d) the role of English as a ‘lingua franca’, e) introduction of foreign languages in early stages of education, f) development of multilingual education.

The verbal data underwent both qualitative and quantitative analyses; Data reduction, which involved first and second level coding, resulted in groups of categories/sub-categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which were classified into basic thematic strands. Furthermore, statistical analyses of the verbal data were used. Frequencies and percentages for all categories/subcategories were obtained. The technique of chi-square-test ($\chi^2$) was performed in order to identify differences in teachers’ attitudes and perceptions which need to be considered in terms of the development of effective and efficient multilingual education.
3. Results

The interview data, after being coded, resulted into 37 subcategories, classified into 10 categories, which were grouped into five thematic strands: a) defining multilingualism; b) status of languages; c) multilingual competence; d) multilingual education; e) early foreign language learning.

3.1 Defining multilingualism and the status of languages

‘Multilingualism’ was perceived by the great majority of the teachers a) as a person’s ability to communicate across linguistic and cultural boundaries ( plurilingualism) (95.3%) and b) as the co-existence of different language communities in the European Union (multilingualism) (23.3%). A considerable number of the participants defined it as the ability to communicate in diverse cultural and linguistic environments (36%); it was also regarded as the ability to comprehend and communicate in more than one language which tends to encourage people to become more open and sensitive to other cultures within the European context (33.7%). In relation to the promotion and enhancement of sensitivity to diversity, statistically significant differences ($x^2 =3.299$, df=1, $p=.05$) were identified between those EFL teachers who hold a master degree (45.5%) and those who do not hold one (26.4%). In addition, a greater percentage of the teachers of secondary education (46.3%) highlighted the advantages of ‘multilingualism’ as a means to communicate in different cultural and linguistic environments (36%) in contrast to the teachers of primary education (26.7%) ($x^2 =3.702$, df=1, $p=.05$). Regarding the ‘status of the European languages’, the vast majority of the teachers (81.4%) declared that ‘equity is far from being a reality’, while the need for the promotion of the lesser-used European languages (15%) was also put forward. Moreover, they stressed the fact that the supremacy of ‘high status’ languages like German, French, Italian, and Spanish (64%) is the result of the unarguably higher political influence and financial status of the countries, where these languages are spoken (43%) (Table 1).

### Table 1. Thematic strands and categories related to defining multilingualism and the status of languages

| Thematic strands and categories | Percentages |
|-------------------------------|-------------|
| 1. Defining multilingualism    |             |
| 1.1 Perceptions of multilingualism |             |
| 1.1.1 Ability to communicate across linguistic and cultural boundaries | 95.3% |
| 1.1.2 Co-existence of different languages | 23.3% |
| 1.1.3 The key to discover other cultures in the European context | 29.1% |
| 1.1.4 The ability to communicate in different cultural and linguistic environments | 36% |
| 1.1.5 Promotion and enhancement of sensitivity to diversity | 33.7% |
| 2. Status of Languages         |             |
| 2.1 Member State languages     |             |
| 2.1.1 Equity of languages is far from being a reality | 81.4% |
| 2.1.2 Necessity for the promotion of lesser-used European Languages | 15.1% |
| 2.1.3 Interrelation between economical status of a country and language dominance | 43% |
| 2.1.4 Necessity for every European citizen to learn English as a lingua franca | 64% |

3.1. Multilingual competence and multilingual education

Concerning the issue of ‘multilingual competence development’, it was emphasized that encouraging European citizens to achieve a communicative ability in two languages and to update their language ability to comply with the demands of current conditions is inevitably a necessity (47.7%). For this reason, the vast majority of the teachers (91.9%) strongly supported the provision of increased lifelong opportunities for foreign language learning, since it holds an array of benefits, such as multilingual comprehension (45.3%) and openness to other people’s languages and cultures (27.9%). It was the EFL teachers with a master’s degree who were mostly in agreement (63.6%) with
prioritizing the development of the citizens multilingual repertoire and ability to communicate in at least two European languages compared to those who do not have further qualifications (37.7%) ($\chi^2=5.469$, df=1, p<.05).

Also, a certain part of the teachers (20%) considered the integration of multilingualism into the teaching of a variety of languages as a core subject in secondary schools. More precisely, a significant part of the teachers (64%) agreed on introducing Italian and Spanish as a FL in secondary education. Another noteworthy percentage of the interviewees, about a fourth of them, insisted on having Balkan languages introduced in secondary education (38.4%). The cross-tabulation indicated statistically significant differences ($\chi^2=3.911$, df=1, p=.05) between the master holders (51.5%) and non-holders (30.2%) (Table 2).

In quest for the improvement in standards of, ‘teaching and learning attainments’, a significant part of the participants reported that the following factors should be considered. **Institutional factors**, such as the ‘design of new FL curricula’ (18.6%), the ‘improvement of the quality of teaching materials’ (32.6%), ‘provision of more time in the curriculum to advance competence in target languages’ (32.6%), ‘limit the number of students in the language classroom’ (16.3%) and ‘link FL teaching to KPG Certificates’ (18.6%). KPG are the State Certificates of Language Competence that take place twice a year under the auspices of the Greek Ministry of Education and are in line with the levels identified by the Common European Framework. There was a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2=4.015$, df=2, p=.05) between primary school teachers who showed higher interest in the ‘provision of more time in the curriculum to advance competence in target languages’ (42.2%) than the secondary school teachers (22%).

**Teacher factors** related to teachers’ professional development, which included ‘the updating of skills and qualifications of EFL teachers’ (30.2%) as well as ‘the level of training support they are provided with’ (33.7%). The cross-tabulation revealed statistically significant differences between a) the primary and secondary education teachers ($\chi^2=5.584$, df=1, p<.05), since it was the secondary education teachers who indicated a greater need for attending in-service training programmes (46.3%) than their colleagues in primary education (22.2%); and b) between the EFL teachers holding a master’s degree and those without one ($\chi^2=3.899$, df=1, p=.05), as teachers with a master degree (55.5%) mostly opted for the provision of in-service training compared to those without any further qualifications (26.4%) ($\chi^2=3.899$, df=1, p=.05).

Concerning the factors related to the improvement of teaching quality, the participants declared their need for becoming more effective in their teaching practice in terms of ‘updating their teaching methods’ (30.2%), ‘managing and sustaining the students’ motivation in the process of learning two languages’ (14%), as well as ‘adapting the FL teaching processes to functional requirements’ (30%) (Table 2). Moreover, it was the primary education teachers who expressed a stronger preference for adopting a communicative approach to language teaching (40%) compared to their colleagues in secondary education (19.5%) ($\chi^2=4.269$, df=1, p=.05). Also, a higher percentage of the teachers with a master degree were in agreement (24.2%) with the necessity to manage and sustain the ‘students’ motivation’ while learning two FLs compared to their colleagues without such qualifications (7.5%) ($\chi^2=4.721$, df=1, p=.05).

### Table 2. Thematic strands and categories related to multilingual education

| Thematic strands and categories | Percentages |
|--------------------------------|-------------|
| 3. Multilingual Education      |             |
| 3.1 Suggestions about introducing FLs at public schools |             |
| 3.1.1 Learning a variety of FLs at secondary level | 20%         |
| 3.1.2 Introduction of Italian and Spanish | 64%         |
| 3.1.3 Necessity of learning Balkan languages | 38.4%       |
| 3.1.4 Necessity of learning non European (Member State) Languages | 18.6%       |
| 3.2 Suggestions about teaching FL- students’ needs |             |
| 3.2.1 Increased time devoted to language teaching | 32.6%       |
| 3.2.2 Adoption of the communicative approach | 30%         |
| 3.2.3 Development of new teaching materials | 32.6%       |
| 3.2.4 Linking FL teaching to KPG Certificates | 18.6%       |
| 3.2.5 Limit the number of students in FL classes | 16.3%       |
| 3.2.6 Renewal of FL curricula | 18.6%       |
| 3.3 Suggestions about teaching FL-the teachers’ needs |             |
| 3.3.1 Updating of teaching methods | 30.2%       |
| 3.3.2 Managing students’ motivation in learning two FLs | 14%         |
| 3.3.3 Inservice teacher training | 33.7%       |
3.3 Early foreign language learning

Most of the interviewees showed positive attitudes towards *early English language learning*, since they believed that very young children can learn easily, quickly, and effectively at the age of five and/or six (53.5%). FL learning at such an early age can also lead to improving cognitive abilities and positively affect ‘long term academic achievement’ (20.9%). In addition, early foreign language learning was stated to be effective if planned to take place in a friendly classroom environment through ‘game-based processes’ (24.4%), which are aligned with and meet the children’s needs (20.9%) along with the provision of ‘suitable materials’ (3.5%). Statistically significant differences were revealed ($x^2 = 3.713, df=1, p=.05$) between the secondary education teachers (12.2%) and their primary education colleagues, who laid more emphasis on addressing the children’s needs (29.9%) concerning early foreign language learning.

4. Conclusion

The findings of the study indicated the EFL teachers’ overall positive attitudes towards basic issues/major aspects of multilingual policies and underlined the efforts to improve the teaching of European languages in the context of Greek Educational system. It was revealed that, on the EFL teachers’ part, there is a growing awareness of the merits of multilingualism and the advantages of encouraging the lifelong learning of languages (Tokuhama-Espinoza, 2008), where appropriate, starting at preschool and primary school age in order to enjoy/ensure the beneficial impact of multilingualism on young individuals (Hu, 2007).

Moreover, despite the deeply rooted belief which associates the knowledge of English with social, economic, and ‘knowledge’ benefits (Crystal, 2003) it was acknowledged that learning English as a *lingua franca* can by no means present the one and only solution for interlingua communication (Thije & Zeevaert, 2007, p. 3-4). The view is adopted that every Greek citizen should acquire meaningful communicative competence in at least two other European languages in addition to their mother tongue as part of their formal schooling in primary and secondary education, which is in line with the ‘1+2 formula’ suggested by the European Commission. For this reason, there is a consideration for multilingual competence/proficiency to be achieved by all students in mainstream education by presenting them with a variety of languages in order to promote individual choice and diversity (Cunningham, 2006) in developing a multilingual repertoire (Griva & Chostelidou, 2010; Lüdi, 2006). It is regarded that a principled approach to multilingualism as opposed to the notion of linguistic imperialism can hopefully result in “the rediscovery of the importance and the role of other languages and value systems”, which in turn may prove a real challenge “for the long-established position of English as a *lingua franca*” (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2006, p.536).

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