The perception of diversity and intercultural understanding by the English Language Teachers in the Greek State Elementary Schools[1]

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Abstract

Multicultural classrooms have always been a great challenge for teachers, let alone English Language Teachers who know that English as L2 or even L3 promotes successful communication not only in the classroom but also among people worldwide. The teacher's role, among others, is to inspire and socially educate children instilling values. This paper presents the results of a qualitative research on the English Language Teachers' perception of diversity and their intercultural understanding. The semi-structured interview was applied as the most appropriate implement to collect data. Thirteen English Language Teachers employed in the Greek State Elementary Schools were interviewed in autumn 2016. The conclusions drawn after the completion of content analysis are clear. To begin with, English Language teachers are aware of all the guises of diversity and are handling them rejecting racist attitudes. Furthermore, they take advantage of the fact that English can be used as a medium of intercultural communication in an Elementary School classroom and put emphasis on the teachers' essential role. Finally, teachers realize their mission and are trying hard to ensure the development and cultivation of intercultural understanding, with a view to fostering respect to the person's unique nature and its contribution to the multicultural mosaic.

Keywords

diversity, intercultural understanding, English Language Teachers, Greek State Elementary Schools

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Introduction

The present study demonstrates part of the findings of a broad research which was carried out in autumn 2016, in Ioannina, a regional city in northwest Greece.

The research came up as a result of evaluating the experiences gained during our personal involvement in the contemporary school reality. This reality reflects the multicultural social state. It asks the teacher, who is aware of their pedagogical and sociological role and perceives the value of diversity, to be able to apply practices and actions with a view to ensuring equality and equal chances in the classroom.

Primary School English teachers, realizing how important their role and mission is, use interculturalism as a medium of building smooth interpersonal relationships in the classroom, aiming at intercultural understanding and intercultural communication. As a result, the acknowledgement of differences and the exchange of cultural elements among people of different origins comes effortlessly.

This paper consists of four parts. The first one presents the theoretical framework on which the research was based. Initially, the researchers take the difference between multiculturalism and interculturalism for granted. Moreover, they study the theory of communication and its direct relation to culture, in order to define the successful communicator's features. Finally, they highlight the main goal of the study, intercultural communication in the classroom, where the teacher, and especially the English Language Teacher, plays a vital role and determines the pupils' social nature and mentality. The methodological tool of the semi-structured interview, discussed in detail in the second part, was applied in the research. Specifically, thirteen English Language teachers employed in Greek State Elementary Schools were interviewed, paying respect to all the commitments such a procedure entails. The findings of the interviews are elaborated and discussed in the third part of the paper. This provides insight into further investigation on the topic. The conclusions drawn after content analysis are presented in the fourth part. The research questions are verified, providing evidence for the necessity of further, extended research on the relations between culture, foreign language and intercultural communication.

Theoretical framework

The research described in the present paper focused on the following theoretical approaches, according to which the axes of the interview

were categorised and the products of the qualitative research were evaluated:

The distinction between the terms 'multicultural and 'intercultural' is clear. "'Multiculturalism' describes a situation, since all countries are multicultural, while the 'intercultural approach' refers to procedure and action [...] it focuses not only on one principle, but also to strategic action" (Rolandi-Ricci, 1996).

Interculturalism, according to Thurlow (2010), asks individuals to acknowledge that sometimes one's actions, being the reflection of their cultural identity, can negatively affect the 'other'. Everybody has to take responsibility for their actions.

Under such social circumstances, the need for Intercultural Education is urgent. "All schools are potentially Intercultural, since they all educate foreign students [...]" (Nikolaou, 2009, p.230). "[...] the educational systems have to give priority to the development of Intercultural Education as a means of understanding other peoples and evaluating their interdependence, [...] to the enhancement of social cohesion [...] promoting citizenship, putting emphasis on nuclear values such as: pluralism, human rights, [...] equality, justice [...]" (Unesco, 2000, p.4).

As regards communication, we initially studied Habermas' theory (1981), who states that successful communication constitutes of three factors: civilization, personality and society. Wolton (1997) claims that communication cannot be examined on its own. It is an 'anthropological experience', which condenses the history of a civilization and a society. Jandt (1998, p.44) adds that "[...] communication and culture are inextricably associated. If we ignore it, we may cause misunderstanding among people of other cultures".

Chen and Starosta (2008, p.219) adopt Belay's model, which describes the three prospects of Intercultural communicative ability: sensitivity, awareness and relativity, and state that interculturally competent communicators: "[...] know not only how to interact effectively and appropriately with people and the environment, but also how to fulfill their communicative objectives with respect and verification of the 'others' multidimensional cultural identities [...]".

Competent "communicators" have a strong personality, communicative skills, ability to adjust to new circumstances and cultural conscience (Jandt, 1998).

"The three elements that interact during Intercultural communication is perception, verbal and non-verbal communication. We, again, realize that language and civilization are parts of the same equation" (Katsillis, Moustairas, & Spinthourakis 1996, p.170). According to Habermas

(1998), communicative action, featured by spontaneity, depends on the existence of a linguistic system.

Our research was based on the use of the English Language as a common language among people of different origin and a means of successful intercultural communication. English is taught in Greek Elementary Schools to all children, aged six to twelve.

All teachers, and in our case English teachers, should be aware of their fundamental role and educated to perform in multicultural classrooms as: "[…] copying with racism, exclusion or even religious issues demands high quality skills and professionalism" (Gundara 2006, pp.14-15).

Methodology

The interview was selected to serve the purposes of the present research. As Mason (2002) notes, interviews not only contribute to collecting data but can produce it as well, being among the most accepted types of research, able to measure the countable dimensions of social reality. Interviews can sum up the latent interaction between the research material and the relations between the social world and the researcher.

The semi-structured interview, divided into axes, augments the interviewer; the questions were not addressed in a strict order, but in accordance with the needs of the discussion, with a view to allowing the smooth flow of the interview (Robson, 1993).

The whole procedure took place in autumn 2016, in the city of Ioannina, Greece. The sample was random and convenient: thirteen English Language Teachers working in the State Elementary Schools, who had been informed about the topic of discussion and they had been provided with reassurance about the study's code of conduct. Two of the thirteen participants were men. All of the participants had previously been employed in the private sector as teachers. This was considered to be an advantage in this case, since their experience was not limited and they were expected to have had in-depth understanding of the educational reality. The places where the interviews were held were chosen by the interviewees themselves, to make them feel comfortable and achieve communication.

All the interviews were recorded, so that the given answers could be meticulously elaborated, to ensure the most objective approach to the investigated issue. The researchers aimed at drawing secure conclusions, able to enrich knowledge in the specific field of study and at being given the possibility to express suggestions for further thought and research.

Findings

The first question that was addressed to the subjects of the research was:

How do you perceive the concept of diversity within the context of the contemporary school reality?

The vast majority used the synonym word 'difference' to approach and define diversity; one teacher just described it. Specifically: "[…] *the different entity each student has […]*" (int.13), "*First of all, I have general understanding; I mean I think everybody is different in the classroom*" (int.8) and "[…] *school classroom has always consisted of unique persons…*" (int.11). In addition, a teacher, based on her personal experience, refers to what she is used to telling her students the very first time she tries to make them aware of diversity "*Look around. Can you see anyone the same as you? […] So, everybody is different […]*" (int.8). The minority, two teachers, being unable to describe what diversity in the classroom is, provided vague answers: "*What if I cannot answer? […] I am not sure […] OK […] I think all children are different […] with the same rights and same obligations […]*" (int.12). The teachers themselves made reference to the guises of diversity, primarily national and racial, followed by social or the religious: "[…] *there are different children who belong to different groups, social, national, different races, religions […]*" (int.7) and "[…] *their way of thinking is affected by factors such as their family, the socio – economic state […]*" (int.11). It is worth emphasizing one teacher's view that: "[…] *our classroom is multicultural. Foreign students have their own unique philosophy, which we have to respect and simultaneously give them the chance to interact with native students […]*" (int.11). The subjects in the sample, either consciously or subconsciously, are able to define diversity "[…] as not only natural uniqueness and dissimilarity, due to the DNA composition, but also as the capability of personal will and differentiation of the common characteristics of human nature" (Portelanos, 2015, pp.58-59).

As regards the second question:

Is sensitivity towards diversity issues a presupposition for effective teaching? the entire sample responded positively:

"*Of course, it is. It obviously is. If I don't know who is in front of me […] if I have no sensitivity […] to learn […] and to understand what is hidden in every child's soul […]*" (int.13), emphasizing the positive feelings that determine harmonious coexistence, performance and cooperation on the school grounds: "*The interactive relationship both in the classroom and on the school grounds is based on the*

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feelings, and children are receptors of all messages and feelings" (int.8). Furthermore, in their attempt to provide as explanatory answers as possible, the English teachers commented on the teacher's role "[…] *whose task is not only to impart knowledge but also to cultivate the students' full potential* […]" (int.8) in concert with the principal, the school staff, the parents and whoever is implicated in the educational procedure "[…] *we, altogether, are trying to deal with diversity problems* […]" (int.2). All the interviewees realize their role and state that it is of utmost importance to instill universal values such as respect, solidarity and equality, which are thought to be unquestionable, in the minds of the young, especially in a «School for all», without exceptions (Soulis, 2008). Though teachers are sensitive towards diversity issues, they are not formally supported or educated by the state, so they take the initiative to enrich their knowledge and put theory into practice in order to achieve harmony in the classroom and reach intercultural understanding and communication (Nikolaou, 2005).

The third question aimed at investigating the teachers' reaction towards racist comments or behaviors:

Has it ever happened to you to change your lesson plan due to racist comments in the classroom?

With the exception of just one teacher who noted that "*[f]ortunately, this has not happened, […] racist incidents […] for the time being* […]" (int.6), the overwhelming majority admit that the comments are made against children from Albania, Pakistan and, more recently, Syria. They have interrupted the lesson because: "[…] *it is as if there is an elephant in the classroom and you are pretending you cannot see it* […] *you cannot keep on teaching* […]" (int.7). It is the teacher's role to "[…] *start a dialogue with the kids and make them understand that diversity is not a curse* […] *after all this is the reason why we design and carry out educational programmes in the school year. To make children aware of the real world*" (int.8) since "[…] *one of the primary goals of education is to socialize kids and put emphasis on values such as respect to what is different* […]" (int.11). Teachers know that human rights are to be taught in practice: "[…] human rights are not abstract as regards their features and the subject to whom they are addressed. They concern every single person who relates and contributes to the moulding of the environment in which they live" (Portelanos, 2015, p.167).

In order to proceed to the second part of the interview entitled 'intercultural understanding' we addressed the sample a question relevant to the subject they teach, Language.

Do you ever mention or make use of the foreign students' mother tongue in the English classroom?

Only one interviewee provided a negative answer: *"Rarely, almost never"* (int.6). The overriding majority, twelve out of the thirteen interviewees, said that the use of their language makes foreign students : *"[…] feel strong and be more courageous"* (int.8), *"[…] motivates them […] to realize that diversity is something positive […]"* (int.13) and *"[…] the foreign students are urged to share with their classmates elements not only of their language but of their culture in the classroom […] as the students feel more welcome in the classroom […] and the natives accept the differences and spot the similarities […] making the 'other' seem less alien"* (int.11). The teachers verified the view expressed by Nikolaou (2005), according to which the use of a foreign student's mother tongue in the classroom helps develop a language culture, understand multiculturalism and enhance intercultural understanding and communication.

To investigate the level of the sample's intercultural understanding, we firstly asked the sample:

Do foreign students in your class feel free to present elements of their culture, language or religion, even if these are different from the dominant?

The majority was assertive in this case. The use of adverbs such as: *"always"*, *"surely"* and *"definitely"* proves they are self-confident and consciously cultivate intercultural understanding in the classroom through the exchange of cultural elements, with a view to enhancing osmosis. Specifically, they said: *"English Language lessons, and generally foreign language lessons, give the students the chance to feel […] free […] it is strictly related to the teachers themselves […]"* (int.13) as what teachers are really interested in is making students aware of each one's unique identity: *"[…] we are all unique and equal […] you have to be proud of your Albanian origin […]"* (int.5). Two of the English teachers were more insecure: *"I guess I am doing so […] I am trying to […] I am urging them […] I feel they are responding […]"* (int.8) and *"[…] I am trying to make them feel comfortable […]»* (int.11). It is worth presenting the two males' point of view in this question; both were negative. The first argued that *"[w]e have to be honest […] No, they don't […] teachers and parents are responsible for this […] when one is called Albanian, it entails a negative connotation, so they do not feel free to present elements of their culture […]"* (int.2). The second male teacher believes that the curriculum is not flexible enough to allow such interventions: *"[…] the margins […] the students cannot develop*

anything else [...]" (int.6). No student rejects the constant exchange of cultural elements, when it is an integral part of the educational procedure. After all, students have to learn to appreciate both the linguistic and cultural benefits and perceive them as a valuable source for the evolution of the community (Leo, 2010, pp.14-15). In addition, the interviewees pointed out that their students imitate all their teachers' reactions. As a result, teacher's responsibility for the cultivation of intercultural conscience is huge. The teacher, being aware of their pedagogical role (Konstantinou, 1997, p.86), must be able to fully comprehend the social and educational reality so as to focus on matters of social inequality, discrimination and dependence (Fykaris, 2010, pp.140-141).

Then, the interviewees were asked:

Do you believe that foreign students experience the right of equal opportunities in the classroom?

Only half of the sample could guarantee equal opportunities: "*They definitely have the absolute right* [...] *all students feel equal in my classroom* [...]" (int.7). On the contrary, two English teachers answer that the foreign students cannot be treated equally. The first claims that this happens due to their origin and social capital: "[...] *they superficially have this chance* [...] *but its' their family* [...] *their social circle* [...] *that keeps them away from experiences and they do not have same accessibility* [...]" (int.13). The second teacher, surprisingly, admits that he, himself, is a selective racist and as a consequence, he is not able to respect and accept all foreign students as he does with the native ones: "[...] *if the kid is of Albanian origin, there is a racist attitude not only by their classmates but by me, as well* [...] *somewhere deep on my mind* [...] *we are racists in some cases, against Albanians, for example, not Rumanians or Polish* [...]" (int.2). Though most English teachers provided direct answers, the rest were more reluctant and uttered more mature responses: "*I do my best to avoid injustice* [...]. *If I fail, the responsibility is mine* [...]" (int.8) as "[...] *nothing is done on purpose. I don't think that teachers marginalize foreign students* [...]" (int.6). Unfortunately, the sample subjects' answers caused queries with regard to teachers' ability to build strong democratic personalities who will be the future citizens of the world. What they probably do not know is that: "[...] learning includes knowledge, behavior and practice [...] A classroom is a collective community where equal treatment is performed" (Portelanos, 2015, p.232).

In an attempt to define the concept of communication, the core of our research, the first question the English teachers were asked was:

What is communication in the classroom?

All of the subjects in the sample perceive communication as interaction, which can be successful under certain circumstances, after restrictions have been overcome, depending on the individuals – students and teachers – and their attitude towards the various guises of communication. To be more specific, eight interviewees stress the acceptance of rules and respect: "[…] *to be able to listen to your opinion, not necessarily accepting it, but I respect you, and* […] *we cooperate, we work harmoniously* […] *each one of us can have their own opinion, this does not exclude a good relationship* […]" (int.12), "[…] *to follow the rules* […] *to respect the dialogue* […]" (int.3). Two other teachers claim that feelings affect communication directly: "*The relationship we develop with the children is unique. It cannot be restricted to words. It is sound, feeling, movement* […]. *Children demand too much energy and reward you with a smile and rich feeling* […]" (int.8) "[…] *it's the feeling, the body posture, the body language* […]" (int.9). Additionally, a teacher puts emphasis on the code of communication children usually apply to exchange messages: "[…] *children communicate directly* […] *they can be hostile or sarcastic* […]" (int.13). Finally, according to one interviewee both time and space can sometimes hinder successful communication, while another one mentions the equality between communicators in the classroom and believes it is of utmost importance for both parties to respect each other, as their roles are different.

The sample's responses were adequate and complete, compatible to the theory of communication. "The amount of common knowledge communicators share is vital, as it determines the quality of communication. Social interaction and communication are affected by the perception of what different is and how it can be handled" (Gunthner & Luckman, 2001, pp. 57-58).

The question *How can different cultures affect communication?* aimed at approaching the term intercultural communication.

The vast majority of the sample admitted that culture is a determining factor but if values such as respect and tolerance regulate the procedure of communication, then the results will be fruitful: "[…] *though at first glance it may seem that there is a big gap, between the cultures, I believe that somewhere, in the middle, there are some common elements* […]" (int.2) and "[…] *since the different culture entails different beliefs, different way of thinking, this is the point we have to focus on* […]" (int.1). Expanding their answers, two interviewees commented: "[…] *circumstances have to be appropriate, able to promote cooperation and respect among*

different cultures, which will interact and coexist, protecting the team's and the community's cohesion, while the members will preserve their unique identity [...]" (int.11) because "*[...] when we realize the difference, we will understand ourselves better and, thus, we will be able to communicate effectively [...]*" (int.7). All the respondents admitted that when our behavior is modified intercultural communication can be achieved. According to Jandt (1998), intercultural communication refers to face-to-face interaction among people with a different cultural background.

Additionally, the teachers were asked to delineate the successful communicator's profile.

Which features compose the successful cultural communicator's profile?

In order to describe the successful cultural communicator, teachers used either single adjectives or skills and behavioral patterns. Five out of the thirteen interviewees think that the interculturally competent communicator must primarily respect others: "[...] *respect is a broader concept, we mean to respect origin, to respect culture, the way one thinks [...]*" (int.2) since "[...] *if you cannot respect yourself [...] I think everything works out harmoniously [...] then I can more easily accept the 'other', who can be different [...]*" (int.13). In addition, four participants in the research stressed the communicator's emotional and social intelligence: "[...]*one that can easily be in somebody else's shoes [...] able to cooperate with people of different opinions [...]*" (int.7) and their advantages are "[...] *cooperation, ability, empathy, willingness to help [...]*" (int.10). The answers mentioned above are consistent with what Jandt (1998) describes as good and the competent intercultural communicators. The former have a strong personality, communicational skills, ability to adjust to new circumstances and intercultural conscience. The latter learn to appreciate other people's and cultures' unique nature.

With a view to understanding the degree to which the sample, English Language Teachers in Primary Schools, perceive the dynamic and the use of the English language in various environments, we addressed three interdependent questions to them. After the responses to the first question *Do you think that the dominance of the English language causes inequality between the speakers and the non-speakers of it?* were elaborated, a variety of opinions was revealed.

Most of the subjects agreed that the English language is a great privilege for those who speak it: "[...] *if you do not speak English, it is as if you are disabled [...]*" (int.1), "[...] *we can communicate [...]*"

(int.10) and "[…] *it leads to discrimination especially in the workplace* [...]" (int.8). Only one teacher thinks that no inequality exists, while another one claims that "[…]*it depends on the way it is used and the goals we set each time* […]" (int.11). Moreover, just three of the sample's subjects pointed out the fact that very young children in the first classes of the Primary school start learning English, to prove the importance of speaking it.

To the second question:

Is English as "lingua Franca" a type of intercultural communication?

The overwhelming majority of the interviewees responded positively. "*Yes, it is a means of intercultural communication* […]" (int.7), "[…]*it is a tool of intercultural communication, if this is used as a common code* […]" (int.11). Only two expressed a potentially negative opinion: "[…] *it could be, on condition that it is not used superficially* […]" (int.3). The teachers' opinions are compatible with the perception regarding the Domination of the English Language (Tsuda, 2010), while English as Lingua Franca does promote intercultural communication.

With regard to the third question:

Were you educated on diversity issues or did you teach in multicultural schools during your university studies?

The English teachers, who have been employed in the state schools for at least thirteen years, all gave a negative answer: "*No, unfortunately, not*", explaining that: "[…] *though multiculturalism has been an issue of discussion and speculation for decades* […]" (int.11) "[…] *I believe that education had not been concerned with multiculturalism or interculturalism* […]" (int.3). Though the teachers have not been educated on dealing with intercultural matters, they know that the degree of the teacher's intercultural awareness is of vital importance (Grassi,2007), since in multicultural classrooms the way teachers handle foreign students is decisive, as the relationships between the teachers and the students depend primarily on the stereotypes and the prejudices (Schell,2009).

Conclusions

The researchers, after analyzing and evaluating the data collected through the methodological tool of the semi-structured interview, verified their research hypothesis and reached conclusions, which provide useful information with regards to English Teachers' role in the multicultural classroom and their ability to promote interculturalism. They also promote research in the field of interculturalism in relation to

teaching English as a foreign Language. As the sample of the research was limited, however, the conclusions are not to be generalized.

To begin with, all English Language Teachers in Greek Elementary State schools are fully aware of diversity, since they not only describe it providing synonym words, but also discuss its guises and give examples to support their views. They are sensitive towards diversity issues and take it for granted that sensitivity is a presupposition for successful coexistence in the classroom and in society in general. They put emphasis on the teachers' vital role in the classroom and their contribution to the cultivation of intercultural climate.

In addition, the vast majority of teachers highlight the effort they make to make all foreign students feel comfortable in the English classroom, encouraging them to use their mother tongue as a means of exchanging cultural elements. Only half of the teachers can guarantee equality and equal chances in the classroom, as the teachers are not interculturally educated by the State, to be effective under such circumstances.

Teachers admit that, during their university studies, they were not equipped with knowledge and practical methods to deal with intercultural matters. Due to the fact that is used as an international means of communication, English is capable of promoting intercultural understanding and communication, on the condition that the communicator is competent and has realized how important their mission is.

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