

Attitudes towards the Greek language and the Greek culture, two case studies of Greek immigrants' students in Greek Language Classes in Belgium

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1 Introduction

This paper, making use of qualitative tools (case study, interviews), addresses what happens when students of Greek origin attend classes of Modern Greek Language in countries other than Greece, where the language used – in this case Modern Greek, language 2 – is different to the one they are more fluent in language 1. In particular, we consider how these students firstly, undervalue and perceive Modern Greek as a language of lower importance and secondly, scorn the cultural background they carry while attending school.

This matter is of utmost importance as it is directly linked to the survival of Modern Greek among second and further generation children; in addition, it is an important factor influencing the form of Modern Greek Language classes. To start with, it is necessary to present and clarify two issues that constitute the two basic lines of argument that our paper follows:

(i) Modern Greek is accepted as a *second language* in relation to French and Flemish. (for all the case studies)

(ii) Modern Greek language classes have a double role and function, because they deal not only with language teaching but also aim to acquaint the students with Greek civilization and traditions. These classes are attended by students whose Greek origins and relationship to the language vary.

1.1 Modern Greek as a second language

Belgium is a trilingual country (Damanakis, 1997, Ventoura, 1999, Dialektopoulos, 2008). In Wallonia they use French, in Flanders they use Flemish and in some areas close to the German border, German. Bearing this in mind we accept either French or Flemish as the first language (L1) of instruction, while Modern Greek is accepted as the second language (L2).¹ In the paper the distinction between first and second languages of the Greek origin students in foreign countries is based on the following criteria:

- which language is used more by the students
- which language they know better
- which language they feel more comfortable with
- which language they learnt first (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988: 16)

¹ There are no Modern Greek Classes (C.G.L.) in the German speaking areas and so we focus on the areas of Flanders and Wallony.

Taking Modern Greek as their second language, we accept the notion of bilingualism as it is presented by Weinteich, where students alternate between one language to the other (French-Greek, Flemish-Greek), experiencing an alternation of codes (Heller, 1988: 1, Hoffmann, 1998, Hoffmann and Widdicombe, 1999) and cognitive patterns that are trying to be expressed from one language to the other (Cummins).²

As we will later on see, although the above associations between the language pairs are not fully satisfied, we adopt a flexible use of the term 'second language' for Modern Greek because even in the case of the children who speak very little or no Greek at all they possess *the minimum Greek cultural capital*³ and therefore the Greek language acquires for them a symbolic importance even on a subconscious level.

2 Modern Greek Classes (C.G.L.)

(C.G.L.) are the schools which the students of Greek origin in foreign countries attend for a limited number of hours. Attendance is free and optional. In Belgium they operate every Wednesday and Saturday for four hours each time. The (C.G.L.) schools have two aims, on the one hand to teach Modern Greek and on the other, through this teaching, to introduce students to Greek civilization and traditions.

The students who attend (C.G.L.) have either both parents Greek or one parent of another nationality. In the first case, the Greek language is often spoken in the family-home environment and the students have acquired the minimum conversational skills and vocabulary necessary for everyday communication tasks (B.I.C.S. Cummins, 2001). However, the main language of these families is not Greek but either French or Flemish, so, even at home, on a linguistic level, and frequency of use, Greek has become a second language for these children. (Fishman, 1979, Sella-Mazi 2001)

In the second case, where one parent is of Greek origin, and especially when this parent is the father, Greek language is used very little or not at all for everyday communication. Because of that, it cannot be seen as a language that covers communicative needs, moreover, its social status is much lower than the language spoken in the country of residence. Thus, we can understand why Modern Greek is perceived as inferior and of minor importance. This fact, when discussing educational processes, results in creating a specific educational reality for the Greek language teachers, a reality connected to the language and cultural particularities of these students. We should mention here that all teachers come from Greece and are appointed by the Greek state. All too often then, the unique characteristics of the situation cannot be faced by these teachers and the educational process is further hindered, since the teachers are asked to teach Greek as a second or

² See Skourtou, E. 'The language of Diaspora and the diaspora of language' in Tsokalidou, R. Paparouni, M. (ed) (2005) *Issues on Identity in the Greek Diaspora. Language and Literature*, Metexmio, Athens, p.35.

³ What Damanakis means by using the concept of the Greek cultural capital is that the Greeks of second and third generation finding themselves in the diaspora, despite not speaking Greek, bear many characteristics of Greek civilisation and culture. This is the reason he accepts Greek as a second language and not foreign.

foreign language without possessing the appropriate educational tools or knowledge.

3 The main argument of the paper

We first started to get interested in these problems when we observed the attitude of two students, one attending the C.G.L. school at the small town of Peronnes (S1) and the other at Genk (S2). Although the two students have some differences, (S1 lives in Brussels and S2 in Gingelom, S1 perceives himself as a good student and admits that he likes the Belgian school, S2 admits that he does not do so well at the Flemish school), they both share a common characteristic: they are both students of Greek origin, third-generation Greeks, and at the same time have negative attitude towards their C.G.L. classes.

The negative attitude of these students was what provoked the following educational challenge: whether, through the educational process, we could reduce this negative feeling.

With the use of a questionnaire we drew up and the interviews we try to find out what happens when students of Greek origin attend C.G.L. classes in a foreign country, use a language (Greek-language 2) different to one they know better (Language 1). Moreover, we are interesting in what happens when the Greek language and culture they themselves bring to the previously mentioned environments are treated by them as inferior and of secondary importance.

4 Case study - The students' profile

S1 is thirteen and attends the second year of the Belgian secondary school. His father, the son of Greek immigrants, grew up in the Belgian city of Binche, a city with coal mines. The father of student S1 graduated from the Belgian school and also as a child he attended C.G.L. classes. His conversational Greek is at a satisfactory level. S1's mother is Belgian from the Wallonia district. The student's parents are divorced and S1, together with his younger sister, lives with his mother in Brussels. S1's mother does not speak any Greek.

The two children visit their father every fortnight, during witch time they also attend C.G.L. classes at Peronnes, 8 kms from the city of Binche. S1's conversational skills are quite good, especially for everyday tasks (B.I.C.S.) (Cummins, 2001), but he has problems when it comes to the production of written language.

S2 is thirteen and attends the second year of the Belgian secondary school, as well. He lives at the Flanders area, in the town of Gingelom, at a distance of 45 kms from Genk, the city where the C.G.L. classes are held and where he and his sister attend the Greek language classes. S2's father was born in Belgium (in Brussels, a second-generation Greek), and his father (the grandfather of S2) emigrated from Greece at the end of the 60s at witch point he worked in Greek restaurants. S2's father has the same occupation as his grandfather, the only difference being that the family moved from Brussels

and since 1984 has been living in the Flemish area of Limburg, in the above mentioned city.

S2's mother is Belgian and does not speak any Greek. Her mother tongue is Flemish, but she uses French⁴ when she meets with the teacher responsible for the class. We should mention here that the mother has a very positive attitude towards the C.G.L. classes and she is the one who brings the children to school during the weekend.

S2 speaks quite good conversational Greek for the everyday communication needs (B.I.C.S.) (Cummins, 2001), but he has serious difficulties when it comes to the written language. Last year when he attended G1 level⁵ which is quite demanding, he reacted negatively to any activity relevant to writing.

The teacher of the class has been working with this student for three years. She immediately realised that his age was above the average of the class.⁶ His inclusion in the class was decided by the previous teacher who bore in mind only his low language level.

The class behaviour of both children caused many problems to the teaching process. S1's attitude during the lesson was aggressive and quite often sarcastic. He wanted to strongly show that he would rather be somewhere else and so there were many conflicts with the class teacher. The teacher understood that what the boy reacted against was not she herself, but what she represented. He expressed his anger, his conflict with his father, perhaps their difficult relationship, displacing as such his gathered aggression, while aiming his disapproval at the teacher present.

S2 was completely indifferent towards any teaching activity. During the lessons he did his homework for the Belgian school, stubbornly used Flemish in the classroom and bothered his classmates.

The two teachers decided to talk openly and firmly to both children in an effort to make them participate in the learning process and set boundaries to their behaviour. Together, teachers and students, decided to renegotiate the aims and reasons of what teaching constitutes, so that they could associate the contents of the lessons with the personal and group experiences of the students. Thus, a kind of unwritten contract was formed between the students and the teachers.

The teacher working together with S1 focused at first on **what** and **how** one learns. At the same time they decided to stop using the textbook he had started last year since he admitted that he found its chapters unpleasant, boring and indifferent.

S1 expressed an interest in Greek History and Mythology and so the teacher suggested, in parallel with what it was available in the school library, the *Workshop of Intercultural Immigration Studies* series, some titles, from which the boy chose the ones he considered appropriate for his age and interests. The material was enriched with extracts from various other books

⁴ The teacher does not know any Flemish as most teachers who come from Greece and work in the Flanders, in Belgium.

⁵ The teaching levels follow the *Workshop of Intercultural Immigration Studies* classifications.

⁶ Most children were born in 1998, while S2 was born in 1995.

and texts produced by the students in the class during various school projects. In addition to the above the lesson included other activities such as an introduction to traditional Greek music, folk dance teaching, and digitalised material on subjects related to Greek Mythology and Modern Greek History.

What remains though the crucial point of S1's relation to the Greek language is, as we will later on see, the **reason** why he has to learn Greek.

In the case of S2, the teacher, after talking with him, found out that what bothered him since the beginning of the school year was not only the compulsory attendance, but also his being in an environment with so many younger children. Thus, with the agreement of his parents he was transferred to the next level and agreed that for his written assignments he would be allowed to choose a classmate he would work with. Unfortunately, although his interest was definitely higher than his first year, his performance still remained low.

4.1 The research process

After Christmas the teachers gave the classes of S1⁷ and S2 a questionnaire. The aim of the questionnaire was to find out the students' attitude towards C.G.L. classes, the difficulties they face while trying to learn Modern Greek and also the frequency they use the language. The questionnaire consisted of close and open questions in Greek, but the questions were also explained in French in order to give the students the choice to answer in French. S1, despite being able to answer in Greek, chose to write his answers in French. He only answered one question in Greek, the one which asked with whom he spoke Greek at home.

S2 'had to' write the answers in Greek as the class teacher does not know any Flemish and the Greek language was the only one they shared. Thus his answers were very brief or incomplete because he faces serious problems whenever he is asked to produce anything written in Greek.

The questionnaire questions were used to build up the 'plan' (Verma & Mallik, 2004: 247) for the semi-constructed interview (Mishler, 1996, Mason, 2003) that followed two months after the questionnaire. Taking the interview as 'a discussion with an aim' (Mason, 2003:85) and considering it as a progressive process and not something static, during which an interactive communication is developed between the interviewer and the interviewee, we had to create an atmosphere of trust so that the participants involved could express freely their ideas, thoughts and feelings.

In the case of S2 the teacher has been working with him for the last three years and a relationship of trust and familiarity has already developed. On the other hand, in the case of S1, the teacher had to build their relationship as they

⁷ In the class of S1 there also three girls aged from 8 to 9. His sister, who goes to the third class of primary school, understands and speaks Greek quite well. The second girl understands but she cannot talk, while the third one is a beginner. Both go to the fourth class of primary school.

In the class of S2 there are five boys and six girls, aged between 11 and 13. They attend the third level in accordance to the *Workshop of Intercultural Immigration* classification. The level of the students in Greek is more or less the same, while S2 and two other students face difficulties in following the level of the class.

had never worked together. For these reasons the process of producing data (Mason, 2003:85) differed for the two cases. In the case of S1 the teacher together with the rest of the research team, decided to conduct two interviews at two different times, one in the middle of the school year (end of February) and the other nearly at the end (beginning of June). At the beginning, S1 was more cautious and asked for anonymity and discretion when he was firstly interviewed, while in the second interview, he was more relaxed and did not express the initial concerns. The second interview included more questions in order to collect additional information. After creating a relaxed atmosphere, the two teachers tried to find out whether within this period of their intervention and their informal agreement with the students, their negative attitude towards C.G.L. classes and the Greek language had changed. The interviews were conducted in the school premises and the results from the collected data are quite indicative:

4.2 Categories of answers/Extracts from the questionnaire and the interviews

- Students attitude towards the language they learn

Why are you learning Greek?

S1: Mon, papa m'oblige (my father makes me)

This was his initial answer that he erases in order to write: J'y vais de bon Coeur! (I go there willingly)

He understands that his answer was not politically correct and he corrects it!

S2: My parents want me to learn. They make me.

S1: His initial attitude is negative due to the fact that his family environment forces him to attend and also because of his everyday heavy workload from his Belgian school. He accepts though the fact that attending C.G.L. classes leads to enhancing his level in the Greek language.

S2: His initial attitude is also negative because his family environment also makes him follow these classes. He also has negative attitude towards his Belgian school though. He admits that attending the classes leads to a bettering of his language level.

- Students contact with the Greek language

Do you use any Greek at home?

S1: I use it with my grandmother, grandfather and my father.

Do you speak only Greek with your father or do you also use French?

S1: I use both Greek and French, but mostly French. I talk Greek the most with my grandmother.

Does your mother come from Belgium?

S1: Yes, I talk with my mother only in French, I use Greek every fifteen days when I see my father. The rest of the time I speak only French.

Do you use Greek with Sophia? (His sister)

No, we never use Greek, although our mother does not talk Greek and she wouldn't understand us, we do not even use it when we don't want her to understand something we want to hide.

What about the Greek friends you have? Isn't it helpful that you are learning Greek in order to speak to them?

S2: Yes, that helps a lot.

Where do your Greek friends live?

S2: In the Flemish school there are two or three children who are half Greeks like me and I talk with them. I don't have any friends in Greece.

Do you speak Greek at home?

S2: Yes, with my dad.

With Maria? (Older sister who also attends Greek classes)

S2: No, never.

When you are at the Flemish school do you sometimes use Greek with your Greek friends to say something you don't want the others to understand?

S2: Sometimes, but not very often.

S1: He seldom uses Greek since he talks with his father, grandfather and grandmother only every second weekend and one month every year when he visits Greece. Language two is only used in its conversational form and in order to solve everyday needs. Only when others are present does he have the chance to use the language.

S2: He often has the chance to use Greek since he uses it everyday with his father and Greek grandfather, who also lives in Belgium. He also uses it five weeks every year when the student visits Greece, where he mainly talks with older people from the family environment. In this case the language is strictly used only for family reasons. He only speaks when others are physically present and very rarely on the phone.

- Students' attitude towards the existing learning framework provided by the relevant educational service

Does it bother you to be at the Greek school on Saturdays? Would you prefer to be there on a different day?

S1. I don't like it because it starts at 11:00. I would rather go there earlier on Saturdays and do other things later on.

You are going to the Greek school on an irregular basis and only on Saturdays. What bothers you the most as far as the days and times of the classes are concerned?

S2. I don't like waking up early to go to the school on Saturdays. I would like to go there only on Wednesdays, not on Saturdays. But my mum and dad are working in a restaurant and it is not possible to be at the Greek school on Wednesdays. Besides, we are living far away from school. It is 50 km to go there and come back home.

Do you like the books? Are they interesting? How about your teachers?

S1. The books are good, I learn many things. My actual teacher is good too, but the previous one wasn't good because we weren't speaking much in Greek. He was absent quite often and sometimes he was speaking more in French than in Greek. My last year teacher was speaking only in Greek because he could not understand French.

What do you think of the books that we use to learn Greek?

S2. Sometimes I find them too... childish. Some other times they are quite good. I feel bored when I am asked to write my own things. This is a difficult task for me.

I have been your teacher for the last 3 years. What do you think of it? Would you prefer changing teachers every year?

S2. I prefer not to have different teachers every year. It is better when I know the teacher. I know him/her and he/she knows me.

Do you study Greek at home?

S1. Only on Saturday morning before going to the school. But not on the other days. I have too much job for the Belgian school.

Do you work at home for the Greek school?

S2. Just a little bit on Fridays evening. Sometimes I don't do anything at all.

What do you think of this school year now it is coming to an end? What would you say to someone who would probably ask you if you liked it or not, if it was difficult, indifferent...?

S1. I liked the Greek school, the classes, the songs.

This is our last class for this year. Would you like to continue the Greek classes next year?

S1. Of course (the answer seems direct and honest). Yes, yes, yes... I want to speak Greek.

Now you are in the second year in the Flemish secondary school. Shall you continue the Greek classes next year, given that your job in the Flemish school will be even more demanding next year?

S2. *I will continue because I can't say "no" to my dad. The Belgian school will be all right for me, not as difficult as my first year.*

S1: His attitude can be summed up as follows:

- ❖ Negative attitude towards the day and time of the instruction.
- ❖ Negative towards the all too often changes of teachers and teaching methods.
- ❖ Indifferent to use the language outside the classroom framework.
- ❖ Positive towards the specific academic year, made clear by his honest answer wishing to continue his studies next year.
- ❖ There is a strong subjective factor in relationship to the personality of the present teacher.

S2: His attitude can be summed up as follows:

- ❖ Negative attitude towards the day and time of instruction.
- ❖ Negative attitude resulting from factors related to his access to school and the distance from his place of residence.
- ❖ Negative attitude towards the frequent change of teachers – emotional motives.
- ❖ Negative attitude towards educational material inappropriate for his age.
- ❖ Indifferent to spend time on it outside the classroom frame.
- ❖ Accepting the fact that attendance or not is beyond his choice.

- Students' attitude towards the educational process

What would you do if you could organize the Greek classes next year? Is there anything that you would add?

S1. *Just what we did... history, mythology...*

If you would have the chance to organize the Greek classes the way you want, is there anything that you would change? How would you like it to be like?

S2. *I like it when we sing and when we talk about the earth, the animals, the journeys and the environment. It would love to have a p.c. in the class and search for information in the Greek language.*

S1: Positive attitude, he considers the present educational process satisfactory.

S2: He expresses the need for using technology to enrich the lesson and so become more involved as the direct access to information allows him easier use.

- Effectiveness –personal evaluations

Greek and French are two different languages. What are the biggest differences in them for you?

S1. *Different words, pronunciation...*

What is the most difficult thing for you in the Greek language?

S1. Talking. I understand it but I can't talk so good.

Does this mean that you understand even when you hear it..., let us say, outside in the street?

S1. Yes, I understand, but sometimes I don't (the second part of this answer was in French).

Do you understand the texts that you are reading?

S1. Yes but not everything, not all the words.

Can you go out for shopping on your own in Greece? Do you think that people understand you when you speak in Greek?

S1. Yes, I think that they understand a lot. I have never had any problem.

What is the most difficult think for you in Greek?

S2. To read well and write. I understand though quite many things when I read for myself.

S1: He has no difficulty in understanding written and oral language, but has difficulty in using the language orally while he tries to ignore the written language.

S2: He faces problems in the production of written language and admits to having difficulties in understanding a text read aloud, because he easily loses concentration when trying to comprehend it. He has no other problems with the other skills.

- Their attitude towards their national identities

What would you say to someone who would ask you "your dad is Greek, your mum is Belgian, how about you?"

S1. I am half Belgian and half Greek.

S2. I feel half Belgian and half Greek because my mum is Belgian and my dad is Greek.

S1: Double national identity, Belgian-Greek (Belgian mother, Greek father)

S2: Double national identity, Belgian-Greek (Belgian mother, Greek father)

- Their attitude towards Greece

What does Greece mean for you?

S1. Greece is a nice country, it is sunny and has many "old" monuments (the second part of the answer is in French).

Would you like to live in Greece in the future?

S1. No, I am used in living here (the second part of the answer is in French).

S2. I don't think so. I like going there for the summer holidays but not for ever.

Tell me three words that come up whenever you think of Greece.

S1. Sun, nice country... I don't know.

S2. Summer, sun, see.

S1: He perceives the country as one with monuments and civilization and he is against his permanent residence there as he sees it as a place for summer holidays.

S2: He is also against his permanent residence in the country, for him it is a place for summer holidays.

5 Conclusion

The student's relationship to Greece on a symbolic level seems to be rather weak. They do not possess strong emotional bonds and memories, or feel nostalgia for Greece as their grandparents, who finally constitute their link with the country of the family origins do. An element made clear from the choice of S1 to answer the following question in Greek:

With whom do you speak Greek?

With my father, grandfather, grandmother

However, the characteristic comment made by the grandparents, 'as long as we live we will bring our grandchildren to school, after we die we don't know what will happen' mirrors the relationship of young Greeks with the Greek language. This can lead us to question again the current function and structure of C.G.L. classes as they constitute the only place – especially in the case of the C.G.L. classes at Peronnes - where the children are exposed to Greek. Despite all these, we cannot ignore the fact that C.G.L. classes are an institutionalised environment, which even if we use textbooks that follow a communicative approach to teaching Greek, cannot be the ideal one for compensating for the fact that the students are not exposed to Greek on a daily basis, and so lack the necessary conditions for learning a language.

It is apparent that the Greek state will soon face the following question: whether C.G.L. classes in the future will be able to reflect and cater for students' real needs as they result from contemporary market demands, and as such to become a choice that enhance their professional potential justifying thus the need for their existence⁸; or whether they will remain the nostalgic of the first generation immigrants in Belgium and consequently die out.

In addition, a number of people from the Greek Diaspora in Australia have voiced their concern one of them being Michael Clyne, who mentions the fact that the Greek language is spoken by less people among the Australian families of Greek origin and that the myth of Modern Greek as a mother tongue should be abolished and replaced by a language more attractive to children not only of Greek origin, but also of other nationalities (Clyne, 2005: 68).

⁸ According to Gogolin language learning has to help any students' future career and professional options (Skourtou, 2005: 44).

On the other hand, because we live in a society where technological literacy and multidimensional exposure to multimodal texts (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) constitute the norm of everyday life and the communicative needs of contemporary people, we are led to the need to include in educational policy the techniques and methods that align with the multi-literacies (Cope & Kalatzis, 2000) of contemporary society.

Therefore, when designing educational programmes aiming at teaching a second or a foreign language, we cannot ignore these needs. In approaching the teaching of Modern Greek, we should bear in mind that what constitutes the appropriate directions not only for the needs of a pilot or any other educational programme, but also for the strategies of everyday educational practices is the necessity to exceed the traditional material of the school textbooks, to allow the students to create their own materials, and to use the relevant software and the Internet.

There are already optimistic cases of school coupling between classes from Greece and classes from countries of the Greek Diaspora⁹ which have proved to be educationally effective, both for the cognitive development and the creation of motives among the population of students of the Diaspora to learn Greek. (Kourti & Cummins, 2005: 96)

When children aim at communication they end up producing very interesting texts by continuously trying every existing language form satisfying thus a basic principle, as it has been expressed by Dede, 'I am learning a language because I can use it, I don't learn a language that I cannot use' (Skourtou, 2005: 42), as often and effectively we might also add.

Besides, this is exactly what in his own way S2 has expressed in his interview.

Given the chance to prepare the Greek language classes the way you want, what would you have changed?

I like writing songs, discussing the problems of our planet, the animals, travelling, and the environment. I would also like to have a PC in the classroom and search for information in Greek.

To sum up, we must mention that as time goes by, most Greek immigrants are being assimilated by the host countries and there are more and more mixed marriages. As a result, the demographic and linguistic data are much more different to what they were a few decades ago. Third generation young Greeks, like the two boys we studied, are part of the 21st century, experiencing contemporary life through the rapid developments in digital technology and communication. There are various reasons why it is very difficult to reverse these children's negative attitude towards the Greek school, lack of time, unattractive teaching techniques, staff that changes very often, and most important their emotional distance from their grandparents country of origin. If C.G.L. classes do not manage to become more attractive, competitive and in line with contemporary market demands, (i.e. offering a recognized certificate

⁹ We mention the example of the DiaLogos programme, see DiaLogos (2003): <http://www.rhodes.aegean.gr/gr/program/dialogos>.

of attendance, flexible study programmes reflecting current trends and students needs), then it is inevitable that they will go into decline and thus less students of Greek origin will opt to learn Greek.

The two students we studied, despite their initial reservations, continue to attend the Greek school in a more positive manner. Despite all these, it is very easy to quickly lose interest if any of the factors that keep them in the Greek school cease to exist. What these children voiced was the thoughts and views of a 21st century generation which demands the educational tools offered at C.G.L. classes to coincide with the rest of educational developments. The viability of C.G.L. classes and the preservation of the Greek language among Greek immigrants depend, among others, to a large extent upon the above factors.

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