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Fostering multilingualism and providing linguistic diversity in Vocational Education: Promoting the less used languages

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Abstract

This paper presents a proposal for a research project, which aims to promote multilingualism in the context of Vocational Education and Training in Greece. The proposed project is expected to promote access to multilingual learning resources and address the specific needs of the target population by developing a multidimensional, multilingual syllabus through detailed needs analysis procedures, which involve questionnaires and interviews with students, LSP teachers, directors, and prospective employers. Moreover, it is expected to foster multilingualism through the promotion of the less widely used European languages and provide a concrete basis for linguistic diversification in LSP course design.

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Introduction

This project aims to promote multilingualism in the context of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Greece, in line with European Union (EU) policy mandates, which encourage Member States to support the development of their citizen's communicative competences in at least two foreign languages, in addition to L1 (mother tongue). This is to take place in acknowledgement of the fact that language learning is a 'cornerstone' in mutual understanding of people and a pre-requisite for a mobile workforce across EU countries, while one of the core objectives of the EU policy in education is "Proficiency in three Community Languages", in order to promote multilingualism in the European context. According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001:168), the development of plurilingual and pluricultural competence involves the ability "...to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural action...".

Moreover, member states have been invited to broaden the selection of languages taught at different levels of education - including recognised languages which are however, less widely used so as to enable students to choose

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on the basis of personal incentives and interests or geographical situation of their homeland (European Union, 2008). In addition, in light of the strategic objectives for 2011-2020, VET providers should provide for an international dimension to the learning content and establish international networks, so as to develop cross border cooperation in VET, with the aim of fostering greater mobility of VET professionals (Bruges Communiqué, 2010).

In effect, since linguistic and cultural diversity (Breidbach, 2003) have been identified as dominant features within the context of the EU, an intervention which will provide EU citizens with immediate opportunities to actually experience Europe in its diversity and develop plurilingual and intercultural competences is sought for. In this respect, the proposed project reflects the distinct emphasis placed by the EU on reinforcing the acquisition of the less used European languages and promotes the learning of the languages of neighbouring countries, so as to establish linguistic plurality and enhance cooperation among neighbouring countries particularly in relation to economic affairs.

1. The Research project

1.1. The Context: Institutes of Vocational Training

In Greece, the General Secretariat of Lifelong Learning (GSLLL) was established under L.3879/2010, renaming the “General Secretariat of Adult Education” established by L.2909/2001, under the aegis of the Ministry of Education, Religion and Lifelong Learning. The responsibilities of GSLLL comprise the design and implementation of Lifelong Learning Policies, the development of the National Lifelong Learning Programme, and the supervision and coordination of all bodies and programmes operating in the field of general adult education as well as initial and continuing vocational education and training, among which, the Institutes of Vocational Training (IVT). Since their foundation, IVTs have substantially been engaged in a dual role: a) to train middle level employees, which the labour market was in need of; and b) to handle unemployment which mostly plagued a particular population group, mostly aged from 18 to 25, who could not find a way into tertiary education.

After the completion of their training, IVT graduates receive a “Certificate of Vocational Training”, which entitles them to sit the certification exams and acquire a “Diploma of Vocational Training”, recognised in all EU countries (P.D. 231/1998). This way the graduates are provided with the chance to move around Europe, which could prove of utmost practical value in widening their employment prospects, provided that they are equipped with linguistic competency, which would enhance their employability prospects both within Greece and abroad.

Research findings during the previous decade (Boutsiouki, 2006) indicated that percentages of unemployment among IVT graduates in Greece were very high, while it is anticipated that unemployment rates will increase even more in the future due to the present economic crisis. It is therefore imperative for VET bodies in Greece to extend their scope beyond the borders of their own country, promote transnational cooperation and mobility schemes, and enhance employability of their graduates through a multilingual approach in the studies offered, in line with EU mandates under the Education and Training 2020 Strategy.

1.2. Aims and Objectives

The ultimate aim of the proposed research is to promote lifelong learning and transnational mobility, by developing frameworks and measures to enable more flexible plurilingual learning pathways and by enhancing mobility of VET students and professionals across neighbouring countries. These issues are of major significance for students attending the sector of “Finance and Management” in IVTs given the expansion of the Greek economy in Southeastern Europe during the past decade and the growth of the economies of these countries at present, a point of time when the Greek economy suffers. For this reason, conducting the present research seems more timely than ever. More specifically, the present proposal complies with all the set EU objectives since it aims:

- a) to raise awareness among VET students and personnel concerning the advantages of language learning of the less used European languages in Southeastern Europe;

- b) to develop language learning materials for VET students in order to address their linguistic needs in the form of a modular and multidimensional syllabus;
- c) to build support material for the INSET training of language teachers in VET;
- d) to enhance the multilingual competence of VET students so as to enable mobility across neighbouring countries, promote transnational cooperation and increase employability prospects.

The ultimate purpose is to provide for a comprehensive Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) framework (Kennedy & Bolitho, 1984) by designing a Plurilingual Needs-Based syllabus (PNB syllabus) in five languages (English, Albanian, Bulgarian, Romanian & Turkish), as well as to develop training events for LSP teachers employed in the IVTs. Specifically, the research, the findings of which will be used in developing a multidimensional PNB syllabus, aims to:

- Assess the plurilingual competence of IVT students;
- Identify their needs in learning English as a ‘lingua franca’;
- Identify their needs and preferences for learning the less dominant European languages of neighbouring countries such as Bulgarian, Romanian, Albanian and Turkish;

Moreover, an attempt will be made to:

- Investigate IVT directors’ views on issues related to multilingual Policies in the context of VET;
- Investigate the views of Executives’ in the General Secretariat of Lifelong Learning on issues related to multilingual policies in the context of VET.

The goals of the project are mainly centered on enabling VET students to improve the quality of their linguistic knowledge/ experience as required in transnational contexts. In this vein, an attempt will be made to a) look into LSP teaching issues from the perspective of diversification and plurilingualism, with a focus on enhancing and developing linguistic repertoires; b) deal with the teaching of the less used European languages, based on quality, common principles, standards and processes; c) help students develop multilingual awareness and extend their linguistic repertoires.

The rationale for introducing the English language was its dominant position in the context of Greek educational system, since the prominence of English among the European languages is one of the outcomes of globalisation (Seidhoffer, 2003), and the teaching of English has become the ‘general rule’ in the European educational systems (Truchot, 2002). The teaching of English in the Greek VET system has been included in the curriculum for the whole period of study, four semesters, while taking place for three hours every week. However, besides English as a ‘lingua franca’, multilingual competence, especially in the languages of neighbouring countries in Southeastern Europe, may further enhance professional prospects and employability for VET students’. On the basis of addressing linguistic and cultural variations among neighbouring countries, the following languages have been considered for pilot inclusion in the language curriculum of IVTs in Northern Greece; Bulgarian and Romanian, the languages of two EU member states, Albanian, the language of a country belonging to the former Communist regime and Turkish, the language of a country in preparation for accession in the EU have been selected to develop plurilingual competence and intercultural education as a way of coexistence and enhanced cooperation in the area of Southeastern Europe.

1.3. Methodology and Research Tools

It is argued that language teaching based on generic programmes and materials, which have not been designed with a particular target group of learners in mind, that is, without a thorough needs analysis, will be at least inefficient and most probably prove grossly inadequate. However, the rise of LSP has led to a movement away from traditional course design towards language programmes which take into account the distinct characteristics of adult learners (Rogers, 1996) and of the learning context. In such educational settings, adult students tend to be interested in learning to achieve some clearly specifiable goals which reflect their own needs rather than learning for learning’s sake (Basturkmen, 2006). In effect, identifying the language needs of the learners is considered an

important step in designing any language course while meeting the specific needs of the students is closely related to the teaching of LSP (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Munby, 1978; Flowerdew, 1995).

In this vein, the project will attempt a systematic appreciation of a needs-based approach to course design specifications as suggested by the principles of LSP theory and practice and acknowledges the complexity of the term “learner needs” (Jordan, 1997; Richards, 2001; Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001; Hamp-Lyons, 2001; Boshier & Smalkoski, 2002). On this basis, a framework for needs-based course design is adopted, which involves several phases such as needs analysis, course and syllabus design, materials selection and production, implementation of the suggested teaching and learning process and evaluation of the effectiveness and efficiency of the adopted course design (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998).

Needs analysis can provide data on different types of needs which are dependent on the adopted approaches and purposes for needs analysis and which reflect the frameworks underlying the process of conducting needs analysis (Brown, 2011). All of them reflect different perspectives about the purposes of needs analysis and it is thought that they can take place complementarily and provide rich insights into the multiple dimensions of needs of the target population in terms of their knowledge, skills and competences. To address these various aspects, the combination of different syllabi specifications is required, which are referred to as ‘multidimensional syllabus’ (Stern, 1992) since they reflect the many facets of language which correspond “partially to different patterns of organisation” (Sinclair & Renouf, 1988, p.144). However, it is essential to note that one of the parameters of syllabus specification has to be selected as the unit of organisation, not however, at the expense of other parameters (Johnson, 2011). In this respect, LSP puts forward the need for an approach which stresses the importance of skills and strategies, which according to Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p.13) are defined as a common reasoning and interpreting process as such an approach is believed to underlie all language use.

The syllabus to be developed will be a competence-based document providing options for differentiation concerning the process of managing the development of a diversified competence for VET students in line with their specialisation-related needs while allowing for continuity, variability and individualisation of teaching and learning to take place. In addition, in order to provide for maximum flexibility in the use of the materials and the integration of language skills and knowledge, a process-oriented learning approach is suggested. Also, it is believed that a modular syllabus enables the LSP instructor to be flexible in selecting the elements which are perceived of major significance for a target group of learners and facilitates the introduction of key skills and competences into the syllabus accounting for the learners’ needs and their initial and target proficiency level in the target language.

Moreover, a combination of the quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection will be employed: a) students’ questionnaires; b) directors’ semi-structured interviews; c) LSP teachers’ semi-structured interviews; d) focus group discussions with the students; e) students’ evaluation checklist. This methodological approach resides in the idea that a variety of methods can act in a complementary way producing proliferative results.

Furthermore, the synergy of a multidisciplinary scheme is required so as to ensure a broad investigation of data, as well as provide for a plurilingual framework of a PNB syllabus. The project aims to add to the state of the art in educational research, grounded on the cooperation of an interdisciplinary research team who will contribute their expertise in the project.

2. Expected results & European added value

The project is expected to promote access to multilingual learning resources and develop a language learning syllabus and materials to address the specific needs of the target population - students at the Greek IVTs - in the form of a multidimensional, multilingual modular syllabus which aims to promote their multilingual competence and enhance their mobility and employability prospects across EU countries, in line with EU policy mandates. It is regarded that multidimensionality and modularity are identified as key concepts in the process of developing a concrete basis for linguistic diversification in LSP course design.

The project is expected to foster multilingualism through the promotion of the less widely used European languages. Linguistic diversity within South-Eastern Europe constitutes an added value for the development of economic and cultural relations among the countries of the specific area, while promoting respect for and promotion

of the less widely used languages. There are also further reasons for Greece to maintain close relations with its neighbours such as the flux of immigration of Albanians and Bulgarians in Greece in the last two decades.

In line with their role in the global education market, an important challenge for national VET systems, aligned with the Copenhagen process for 2011-2020, lies in their connection to the wider world in order to remain up-to-date and competitive, able to attract learners from other European and third countries, provide their graduates with training, which can enhance their employability, mobility and efficiency, and promote economic growth in response to broader societal challenges. The proposed project identifies with the aforementioned mandates, which are expected to develop the VET students' plurilingual repertoire to serve different purposes: the promotion of multilingualism, cross-border cooperation, mutual communication, student exchange, widening of study and career prospects, and socialising with the people of neighbouring countries.

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