

## Investigating Teaching and Learning Greek as an Additional Language in Public Primary Schools in Cyprus

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**Abstract.** The current research investigates the ways language is used by mainstream primary school teachers and language learners whose native language is other than the official language of instruction. The setting of the study is the island of Cyprus, where the mainstream population's language (Standard Modern Greek) is taught as the educational first language to native speakers of the Greek Cypriot dialect. At the same time, it is taught as an additional language to non-native Greek speakers (GAL learners). The main aim of the study is the investigation of the use of language and other contextual cues as a tool to participation, communication and eventually teaching and learning acts. Upon examination of this use, the existence of the sociolinguistic phenomenon of bidialectism (the coexistence of two varieties), presents a further complication. The investigation is set within a sociocultural framework, following a neo-Vygotskian perspective. This paper reports a multiple case study conducted in three first grade primary school classrooms in Cyprus, in which ten GAL learners and three mainstream teachers were observed for more than 1500 minutes inside the classroom and in the playground area. The study was also supported by interviews of the teachers and the GAL learners. In addition, drawing activities and persona dolls were used to investigate the perspectives of the participating children. The variety of research methods used, the inclusion of young children in the research, the consideration of bidialectism, the reflection upon all four different acts where language is used and, finally, the different settings where the participants were observed, compose the originality of the study. In this paper, I will present the way the participants of the study used Standard Modern Greek, Greek Cypriot Dialect, English and, finally, GAL learners' L1.

### 1. Introduction

During the last century, there has been a remarkable increase in immigration, as a result of which, people come in contact with many different speech and cultural communities, all over the world. The era when the exceptions of the monolingual norm were multilingual countries has long passed by. In reality, multilingual countries constitute the norm, rather than the exception [1]. Therefore, it is not surprising that multilingualism is not only present, but comprises the majority among the primary schools across Europe [2]–[4].

The majority of additional language learners in these schools, are considerably young in age -like the participants of this study- and have not been previously exposed to any schooling practices, neither in their mother tongue, nor in other languages [5]. This particular feature offers just a further glimpse into the complexity of the situation. The majority of these learners and the schools that have been mentioned constitute a part of the submersive school system. This system refers to the situation on which the school is based on a monolingual scheme that does not include in its

curriculum any of the mother tongues of the other children subgroups [6]. What is even more intriguing, is the fact that submersive schooling, often finds itself linked with ‘a sinking process’ [6, p. 6], since it often results in poor educational achievement for those children [2], [7] that usually leads to early school drop-out, lower income, higher unemployment rates and manages to enhance juvenile delinquency. It is believed that, the educational methods in use at the moment, remain unprogressive and create more difficulties in the multilingual development, simply because we are forced to bow to dominant political and ideological pressures, to ensure that languages remain ‘pure’ and distinct [8].

This mentality comes in contrast with the numerous studies, which have proven and supported quite extensively, that bidialectism and multilingualism are linked with educational success and more positive attitudes towards the various linguistic varieties. Mohanty [7, p. 264] particularly comments that bilingual children “have a distinct edge over their monolingual counterparts in terms of their cognitive and intellectual skills metalinguistic and meta-cognitive task performance and educational achievement”, when they are educated in a healthy educational environment that treats all languages and dialects with respect. Some of these positive outcomes have been ‘loud’ in countries such as Eritrea, Ethiopia, Namibia, Singapore and Vietnam [1], [9].

## 2. Setting of the study

“Multilingualism and multiculturalism have been viewed with skepticism ever since the tower of Babel” [10, p. 1].

It is true that multilingualism and multiculturalism have always created puzzlement in the educational field, let alone, in –until very recently- a homogenous monolingual and multicultural country, such as the one of Cyprus. Cyprus, is the third largest island of the Mediterranean, with an estimated population in 2011, of 838,897, consisting of Greek Cypriots (78.6%) and other foreign residents (21.4%) [11].

Cyprus became an independent country in 1960, after a five-year (1955-1959) armed struggle against the British colonial authorities, where Greek Cypriots (GC) were aiming for the political union with Greece. In the new independent state, back in 1960, both languages, Turkish and Greek, were recognized as the official state languages. English was not recognized as an official language, since it was viewed as a symbol of oppression [12]. Nonetheless, English was found in official documents and used for interethnic communication between Turkish Cypriots (TC) and GC [13]. Nowadays, the English language has managed to consolidate its position in the independent state of Cyprus since the educational and career needs of the younger generations include the acquisition of UK universities’ degrees or the pursued of professional opportunities found in the country [12]. Greek and Turkish remain the official languages in the southern part of Cyprus, even if Turkish is only used in official documents. In the northern part of the island, Greek is not used at all and there are references of the simultaneous use of a formal variety (Standard Turkish) and an informal variety (Turkish Cypriot Dialect) [15]. The geopolitical separation of the two communities, in 1974 and the extended hostile environment in the island for a long period of time, explain why Cypriots are not bilinguals (speaking both Greek and Turkish) [12], [15].

More specifically, in the southern part of the island (Republic of Cyprus), two linguistic varieties are concurrently used, the Greek Cypriot dialect (GCD) and the Standard Modern Greek (SMG). GCD is Greek Cypriots’ mother tongue while, SMG, is their educational variety. The two varieties occupy different domains of usage; this is the so-called functional relationship between two varieties [16]. GCD is used mainly for oral communication and in GC’s daily activities with friends

and family, whereas SMG is used for written production and formal situations [17]. Thus, the linguistic situation in Cyprus is considered to be diglossic or bidialectal, where the standard or high variety is the SMG and the unofficial or low variety is the GCD [18]. Bidialectism is perceived as the coexistence and concurrent use of one or more regional varieties and a standard variety of the same language in a speech community [19]. The phenomenon of bidialectism is an issue that concerns various areas and countries around the world [7], [19]–[22].

Due to the numerous socio-political changes that have taken place over the last decade, the diversity of the country's population has increased dramatically. In 2003, the restrictive measures along the borders, which prevented TC from visiting the south, were partially removed [23]. As a result, many TC started to work in the south. In 2004, Cyprus joined the European Union [23] and many people from other countries moved to the island in search of better employment and higher living standards. These recent historical facts have deeply affected the homogeneity of Cypriot schools. Until recently, schools in Cyprus had a homogenous population of students whose mother tongue was the GCD. However, with the arrival of GAL learners, the consistency of classrooms began to change. According to the 2013-2014 statistical data of the student population, there are 6808 GAL learners in Cypriot primary schools, which represent 13.09% of the total student population [24]. It should be mentioned that by referring to GAL learners, we are not only referring to the children who are new to Greek; GAL can serve as an umbrella term that incorporates students with a variety of levels of competencies, both in the Greek language or any other language, culture or even experience with an educational system. It should be noted that when referring to GAL learners, almost all official circulars of the Ministry of Education in Cyprus from 2004 onwards, differentiate between Turkish-speaking students and all other GAL learners, indicating the political influence that is still present in the educational system of the Democracy of Cyprus. As for the native speakers of GCD, they have long been confronted with a linguistic deficit, which according to teachers is linked with the 'problem' of the dialect as a 'restricted code' [25].

The complexity of the present project's setting lies in the fact that SMG is taught as an educational first language to native speakers of the GCD and as an additional language to GAL learners. Mainstream teachers conduct these language sessions without any specific training in additional language education. The existence of bidialectism further complicates the language learning procedure for GAL learners. This is due to the fact that, both teachers and the majority of the student population use SMG and GCD concurrently. The Ministry has implemented some measures in an effort to provide equal educational opportunities for these students, such as training seminars for primary school teachers [24]. Unfortunately, most of the material used and the research conducted in the field of teaching Greek as an additional language has been conducted in Greece and, therefore, cannot be applied or used in Cypriot primary schools [26]. There are future plans to add multicultural and multilingual features in the new curriculum and school textbooks. However, the new curriculum that has slowly started to be introduced and which promotes the pedagogy of critical literacy and supports multilingualism, has been under serious attack.

### **3. Theoretical baseline**

As it is very well known, the field of Second Language Learning (SLL) can be discussed and investigated through the lenses of various theoretical approaches. Here I argue for a sociocultural understanding of SLL, choosing as a theoretical framework the sociocultural theory, which derives from Vygotsky. Despite the fact that Vygotsky was speaking in the context of first language learning, his ideas managed to influence more recent styles of theorizing and researching SLL.

One of the core ideas of Vygotsky's theory, is the belief that learning comes from outside rather than the other way around [27]. This particular idea explains the naming itself of the theory

“Sociocultural”, because both, social and cultural (for others historical as well), context is of paramount importance. A basic feature to this view of learning is mediation. One of the greatest contributions of Vygotsky’s work, is found in the way he explains the procedure in which a person manages to regulate his/her relationships with himself/herself and with other people - intermental processes [28]. Vygotsky claims that these regulations are conducted through the use of artefact – symbolic tools that are influenced by the cultural context, found at a specific point in time [28]. Some of these tools are considered to be numbers, music and, of course, language. The regulation of these relationships is actually performed through thinking and other higher-level human mental activities, such as voluntary attention, logical thought, learning and problem - solving – these are the intramental processes.

The particular study, through the adoption of the aforementioned theoretical baseline, perceives language learning, not as a monolithic construct, but as a process that is socially and culturally constructed, through interactions and practices in situated activities [29]–[31]. This perspective comes in perfect alignment with the belief that acquiring a target language, involves, not only the phonological, morphological, syntactical and pragmatical system, but also the acquisition of diverse linguistic tools and resources that shape the cultural practices of conversational conventions [29]. In this perspective, I argue for language socialization, communication and language use to have a distinctive role to play in explicating the processes entailed in the investigation of language learning and teaching.

The notion of language socialization is viewed here as the incorporation of two components; the socialization through the use of language and socialization to use language [32]. Language socialization provides a framework, where the slightest learner’s participation in social interactions, is viewed as an opportunity to internalize and gain performance competence, which is mediated through cultural tools, while the interactions are influenced by the context where they are found [32]. Apart from the tools used and the context where they are found, the repeated participation in various communicative practices facilitates the development of frameworks of expectations related to what is considered as knowledge, to our own abilities and we finally develop expectations as to how to show and negotiate our knowledge [33]. These expectations do not only include the use of the tools to be used, but also the feelings of the participants, as well as, the various roles they embrace. Therefore, language socialization provides a fertile ground for identity and power relations’ discussions to inform the investigation of the uses of the various tools.

The second act of paramount importance is the act of communication. Communication is the situation where participants conjointly accomplish to participate in meaningful communication acts, by employing any resources at their disposal [34]. These communication acts may include the sharing of knowledge, ideas, thoughts, information, feelings, emotions, or attitudes [35]. They are regarded as modes of social action, where people’s creativity is emphasized, as well as their active and procedural nature and how all these shape the world [36]. In order for communication to take place and mutual comprehension to be achieved, information is drawn from the links between the various signs that are used, which are closely linked to their context [37].

Language is perceived to be the mediational tool that helps us regulate our relationships through social interactions with other people – the intermental process – and mediate the knowledge we receive from the outside world, inside ourselves by representing our own thoughts to ourselves – the intramental process [38]. Therefore, language is not merely a means of transmitting information and thoughts. It is the vehicle through which speech events are defined, the roles of the speakers are delineated and multiple aspects of identity are projected [39]. Equally informative for the study was the distinction made by Cummins, between the Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS),

that refers to the social, everyday things we manage to achieve with language that are embedded in a rather familiar context and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), that refers to the rather cognitive demanding things we do with language, in order to achieve academic actions, such as explaining [40], [41]. It does not only serve to identify whether teachers' expectations are affected based on where of the two extremes of the continuum their language learner are found, but also to provide a framework on how the participants' language use changes based on whether a particular practice is "context-reduced" or not. Finally, due to the linguistically diverse context of the study, the juxtaposition of the various linguistic varieties was acknowledged and investigated as to how the specific juxtaposition- either code switching or code mixing- was embedded to the sociocultural context found [42].

#### **4. Methodology**

The aims of this particular study were two-folded. On the one hand, I was aiming to explore and investigate the situation in which learners were not only learning a target language, but also thriving in the Cypriot public primary schools. On the other hand, as a teacher myself, I was concerned with the methods which educators find and employ, in order to facilitate learners' adjustment and eventually educate them. To achieve these aims a qualitative approach of methodology was employed, through a multiple case study style of inquiry.

Three different first grade classrooms, of two public primary schools of Cyprus were asked and accepted to participate in the study. The selection of the schools and classrooms was purposive. The participants were three mainstream teachers of primary public schools, young in age between 29 to 30 years old, all female and Greek Cypriots themselves. Only one (Tina) had extensive teaching experience in first grade, multilingual classes. None of them was exclusively trained in multilingual teaching. However, their postgraduate studies had allowed them to be quite familiar with intercultural ideas and theories. The ten GAL learners, whose mother tongue was other than Greek, were 6 to 7 years old. There were 7 boys and 3 girls, coming from Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Philippines. None of their parents were Greek or Greek Cypriot and none of them was born in Cyprus.

A variety of traditional and creative methods was used throughout the study. Initially, classroom observations of Greek language lessons were conducted in each class. More specifically, each of the three classes was observed, audio and video recorded for 400 minutes (40' x 10 lessons). In addition, each participant was observed and audio recorded from one to five times-based on the GAL learners' willingness- during his/her playground time (20' length each time). After the completion of these recordings, GAL learners were asked to draw two drawings of him or her, one inside the class and a second outside in the yard. After the drawings, each language learner was asked to discuss his/her drawings with the researcher. The discussions were audio-recorded. The fourth research method employed was a series of group discussions (each class' participants were joined in a group) with persona dolls. Finally, both GAL learners and teachers were interviewed. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and semi-structured.

A thorough process of qualitative analysis was followed where the coding and organization of the data was conducted based on categorization themes that were generated from the data obtained, without excluding the possibility of some of them to have been based on the literature review

previously conducted. Eventually a concept mapping was generated where the three main acts of participation, communication and language use of the two groups of participants in the two settings of interests were approached based on Vygotsky's triangle (subject- artifact-object). Eventually, following the case study data analysis model as proposed by Rubin and Rubin [43] the generation of themes and presentation of final outcomes were performed through the researcher's lens of interpretation.

## 5. Findings

Due to the restricted space available, I will be presenting the findings of only one of the four research questions, which refer to the use of the linguistic varieties the participants had at their disposal, only in the context of the class.

### 5.5. Teachers' language use

Commencing with teachers' use, GCD was the one that was more extensively used. All three of the teachers employed it for a number of purposes. One of the most interesting uses was when teachers wanted to express their anger, or when they wanted to make discipline comments. Dewaele supports that the majority of people employ their mother tongue when it comes to expressing intense feelings, such as anger. In Pavlou and Papapavlou [44], GC teachers claimed that SMG should be used for discipline, because it holds more 'prestige', however, Tsiplakou [25] found that GCD is often used for restoring the order inside the class. In addition to the expression of anger, GCD was also used for encouragement, comprehension questions, to provide instructions and for procedural purposes related to the lesson. Moreover, it was used to make a joke, to lighten the atmosphere of the class or to make a personal social comment. Tsiplakou's findings correlate with this study's findings. All of the three teachers were perfectly aware of this particular use of their mother tongue. Van De Craen and Humblet [45] found that Belgian teachers were also using the informal variety when making personal comments to their students. Interestingly enough, it was also used to explain unknown vocabulary to their language learners, by providing them with examples from everyday life (see extract 1).

#### Extract 1

Andreas: It's my mum.  
Tina: Your mum is a tailor.  
Andreas: And my grandma was::  
Tina: When she was younger. Who **is** a plumper? <Question was in a louder tone> When **will I call** a plumper **to come** at home? Where **is the** problem **that is fixed** by the plumper? **Have you heard this** word again? <Only Andrianos was raising his hand>  
LL: Me, me,  
Tina: Ah? (.) What **does he fix?** Who knows? Dimitri.  
Dimitris: Houses.  
Pola: @@  
Tina: something inside the houses, but not houses.  
Andrianos.  
Andrianos: This kind of cars,  
Tina: I will pass out.  
LL: @@  
Christos: Lambs.

In this episode, it is easy to observe that Tina started providing explanations of the new vocabulary in SMG and as soon as she realized that it was not successful, she then chose to give an example of the children's everyday life and she switched to GCD. The fact that the teacher switched to GCD, is not something that is surprising, since there is a tendency among teachers to believe that GCD is somehow allowed when there is the need to explain something rather complex [44]. What was surprising was the assumption that both GC students (Christos, Andrianos, Dimitris) and GAL learners (Pola) would have similar experiences and that examples in GCD would facilitate their understanding.

Much more restricted than anticipated, was the use of SMG. Kristia was the only one that advocated her limited use of SMG, which she attributed to GAL learners' inability to comprehend it. On the other extreme was Tina, who employed it the most and for a variety of reasons, even if she had admitted using it less, with the course of time. Nevertheless, the two main purposes for which all three of the participants applied SMG was when they were giving instructions, or asking comprehension questions that were directly, or indirectly, associated with written texts or activities. This correlated with the teachers' own reflections of their use, during the interviews, based on the belief that SMG is better refined than GCD.

In a rich linguistic environment, such as the one where the study was conducted, it was almost inevitable that the varieties would have been mixed. Therefore, it was not surprising, when teachers' mixing of GCD and SMG was observed, mostly when they were explaining unknown vocabulary, giving instructions or for discipline purposes. Unfortunately, there was no opportunity to record the teachers' use of the GAL learners' L1, even if it is believed that having at least some proficiency in the L1 of the students, is identified as an important skill for L2 teachers to develop [46]. However, it seems quite a daunting challenge, especially in classrooms that are so multilingual. Finally, the use of English was the one with the fewest applications. It was observed to be employed solely by Elena, since the specific linguistic variety was the strongest medium of communication with Viron. English was recorded to be used throughout instructions, comprehension questions and finally for encouragement. None of the other teachers used English throughout the recorded lessons.

## 5.2. GAL learners' language use in the classroom

On the other hand, GAL learners' language use presented a rather different combination of the aforementioned varieties, with the use of their own L1 also present. It was very soon extracted, that the classroom talk of the GAL learners was much less than their use of language (L1, GCD, SMG) in the playground. This realization was very much anticipated, due to the contrasting characteristics between the two settings. In the classroom, the majority of the lessons were teacher-centered. GAL learners would talk when they were asked or when they would take initiatives – quite rare due to the GAL learners' shyness and low proficiency level in the target language.

The use of GCD inside the class was the most extensive, comparing to the rest of the varieties described. It was used for asking for help, for clarification requests, for practical reasons and when asking for feedback (see Extract 2).

Extract 2

Tina: What is it my Aman?

Aman: Mrs,

Tina: Yes,

Aman: E::: you are not, not, going to say, say who is good?

Tina: You were **all much better than** yesterday. **All much better than** yesterday! Di d you see how much it helps when we read something **and reread it**, that **helps us** become **better**?

Tina was a teacher that always provided explicit feedback to all of her students after the completion of the reading exercise, at the beginning of each language session. On that day, Tina skipped that part and was immediately reminded by Aman, who seemed eager to find out how good or bad he did on that day. Therefore, he managed to frame a question in GCD about his performance in that particular task. Tina replied to his question in SMG. Providing instruction considers being something that implies authority and the official variety was chosen in this case to highlight that precise role.

The use of the GAL learners' L1 in class was much more restricted, also due to the fact that not all of the students were sharing it with other classmates and because its use was excluding them from the Greek lesson. When it was used, it was either for social commenting, for translation or comprehension requests from peers who were sharing the same L1. Finally, there was no use of English, even in the case of Viron, who even if he wanted to be instructed in English, was trying to answer in Greek, showing his devotion to the task. On the other hand, SMG was solely used when the participants would read instructions or texts from the course book. The participants' restricted proficiency in the target language did not facilitate the effort to investigate whether the use of the various varieties inside the class by them was conscious. However, the opportunity to compare the use of the L1 by them through the different methods employed by the current study provided insightful information. It should be mentioned that the persona dolls meetings revealed that, none of the participants placed Greek language lessons among their favorite subjects. Nevertheless, the interviews provided a more encouraging finding that none of the participants felt uncomfortable or unhappy during these. As expected, the teacher's figure and her role in defusing unnecessary trouble, was dominant in the GAL learners' answers.

## 6. Discussion-Conclusion

Data were presented of the linguistic behavior in the today's multilingual and multicultural classroom of Cyprus. More specifically, based on what has been discussed in this paper, it is apparent, that GCD is extensively and purposively used for several reasons inside the classroom. It is obvious that the informal variety is not only present but sometimes also dominant both in teachers' but also in GAL learners' talk. There was a strong presence of GCD even in occasions when language learning was the ultimate goal, such as in vocabulary explanation towards GAL learners. Previous studies, which have been observing bidialectal Cypriot classrooms have found that GCD is certainly not marginalized [19], [25], [47], [48]. Nevertheless, there is an imperative need to see and investigate language classrooms, not only in Cyprus but also all over the world, as they really are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They are above all, truly plurilingual settings, with everything that this entails. Innovative research should treat them as such and start using that plurality in favor of our schools, our teachers and eventually our students.

If research in this field aims to improve the education provided to millions of students around the globe, then neglecting the existence of unofficial varieties is not the way to succeed it. First grade language learners were selected to be part of the study, because apart from the language learning, and its complications caused by the simultaneous use of formal or informal varieties, they need to



initially thrive in a totally new environment. What was attempted here was not the sided presentation of language learning process, ignoring of everything else that comes before or during it the language learning process. Participation and communication of all those found in these classrooms and classrooms such as these ones are the significant pieces of the puzzle. It is believed that the findings of the particular study can inform both educational policies regarding the various ways in which teachers can hinder or facilitate children's learning and thriving. Simultaneously, they can also add to the general knowledge we have acquired over the years, of the characteristics of teachers' and language learners' participation, communication and language use found in similar multicultural and multilingual classrooms.

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