

## **Teaching English To Sixth Grade Greek Primary School Students through Culture and Through the Avoidance of Stereotypes and Prejudice**

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**Abstract.** One of the major factors which influence the effective learning and teaching of foreign languages is the incorporation of the teaching of culture in the foreign classroom. Teaching a foreign language is not only the teaching of new vocabulary, or expressions, or even grammar and syntactic structures but also those cultural elements which are inter-wined with the foreign language and which aid in the avoidance of stereotypes.

Stereotyping is usually accompanied by ignorance, perhaps even fear. Ignorance can be eliminated through teaching respect for the 'other', the 'different'. Foreign language teaching can become an effective tool in overcoming prejudice towards the 'other', the 'different', this is carried out through teaching respect for diversity and in this way eliminating ignorance of the 'other', the 'different'.

This paper has a two - fold aim: firstly to conduct a qualitative research on the new sixth grade textbook which is used in all primary schools in Greece for the teaching of English as a foreign language, as to whether these books incorporate cultural elements of English speaking countries or cultural elements of other language groups and countries. Secondly, if these new textbooks not only enhance and enrich language competence but also cultural competence which can lead to the respect of the 'other', the 'different', thus encouraging communicative competence. The sixth grade was chosen as it is the school year in which students finish primary school, are pre - teenagers and have a clear picture of the basic concepts of life, society, culture, etc.

Being culturally aware means first and foremost an understanding of yourself and then an awareness and an understanding of the 'other', the 'different'. In this research I will examine whether the language and contents of sixth grade English primary school books are instrumental in helping students gain insights into the aforementioned perspectives.

Research findings so far have shown that the sixth grade textbooks do enhance effective language learning, they also incorporate some cultural elements of both other countries and English speaking counties, communicative competence is also encouraged through the use of these books. Nevertheless, sixth grade course books only partly cater for the need for effective and unbiased cultural competence, stereotypes and prejudice.

### **1. Introduction**

The teaching of English as a foreign language was always of great importance in the Greek community. English as a foreign language was first introduced in Greek high schools in the 70's,

since then many changes concerning the teaching of English, both in the national curriculum and in the course books used in public and private schools, have taken place.

## **2. The Unified Curriculum for Foreign Languages (EPS- XG)**

One of the first steps taken by the Greek National Educational System was to change the previous curriculum of 1982-1985, with a more modern and renovative curriculum (first presented as a draft in the 18/10/2011) so as to make it more student friendly. The existing curriculum is common for all foreign languages taught in all public and private schools in Greece. Learners are categorized according to their proficiency level and there are six levels of proficiency [A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2]. It advocates learner-centredness and approaches the learner as an individual personality with his/her own characteristics and skills. As “different models of curriculum represent the expression of different value systems and divergent views of education” [White, 1988:20] the ideological frame upon which this curriculum is based is Progressivism with heavy doses of Functionalism, as its focal point is the use of the language and more particularly communicative competence, the general “assumption is that mastery of individual functions will result in overall communicative ability” [Richards, 2001: 155]. Language is understood as an instrument of social interaction.

Emphasis is given to both multiculturalism and multilingualism, as well as pluriculturalism and plurilingualism which are all pivotal elements to the acceptance of the ‘other’ the ‘different’. All levels of language, spelling, grammar, vocabulary, phonology, phonetics, pragmatics, semantics, etc, are woven around the aforementioned. The most important innovation of the particular curriculum is two - fold, on the one hand mediation activities which demand the use of interlinguistic and intralinguistic codes, and on the other hand the use of information, technologies which are an important part of students’ communication and which simulates the ‘real life’ into the Greek classroom.

We thus see a ‘metamorphosis’ rather than a simple transformation of the knowledge and how this knowledge is transmitted to the students with the aid of the new curriculum. According to Papadopoulos (2005:5) the quality of the Greek educational system must be revised “so that our young people can respond positively to modern day thinking and challenges, such as globalization with both its positive and negative aspects, the protection of the environment, the dangerous rise of nationalism , racism and xenophobia, as well as the influx of technological information, which is both precious and refutable. Towards this direction the new textbooks were produced, using this educational philosophy and the aforementioned approach to foreign language teaching.

## **3. The Textbook ‘English 6<sup>th</sup> Grade – Pupil’s Book’**

The textbook ‘English 6<sup>th</sup> Grade’ consists of a Pupil’s book and a Pupil’s workbook, both published by the National Organization of Textbook Publishings which is under the jurisdiction of the Pedagogical Institute of Greece and is governed by the respective Ministry of Education and Life Long Learning. The specific textbook is taught in all sixth grade primary schools, both public and private, and is distributed to all public schools free of charge.

It consists of ten units which are further subdivided into three subunits which revolve around a common thematic field such as, for example, unit three which delves into the subject of shopping in the supermarket, in the mall and last but not least e-shopping. Each subunit consists of a reading part, a listening part, a speaking part and a writing part, thus helping students to exercise all four skills.

In some subunits such as, for example, unit three, subunit three, the listening, speaking and writing subsection is substituted by project work, but this does not occur very frequently in the course of the textbook.

Functions of the language are examined through a communicative approach to language teaching. Topics include, exchanging ideas, giving personal information, ordering and buying goods,

describing people's personality, and so on. The same approach is applied in the case of language structure and lexis, in which case vocabulary, tenses, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, linking words, modal verbs, conditionals, and so on, are examined.

As concerning the context of the units, the thematic fields which it probes into are: the school environment, shopping, mythology, literature, music, art, the 'other', history, travelling, experiences, environmental education including their sub-categories. The purpose of this research is to examine whether the 'English 6<sup>th</sup> Grade' textbook teaches English as a foreign language to students of 12-13 years of age without prejudice and without the use of stereotypes. More particularly it poses the following research questions:

1. Do gender differences exist (as concerning occupations, toys, etc.) in the textbook?
2. Is racial, religious, political and social prejudice found in reading and listening texts?
3. Is the 'other' the 'different' depicted in the textbook?
4. What characteristics of the 'other' the 'different' exist in the textbook and how are they depicted?
5. How is culture and multiculturalism depicted in the textbook?

For the needs of this research content analysis was used.

#### **4. English for 6<sup>th</sup> Grade Students**

Before attempting to locate elements of prejudice or characteristics of stereotypes in the textbook I will be looking at the way prejudice and stereotypes are viewed in literature in connection with language learning and teaching. It is, according to Stephens [1997:123] "[...] a commonplace belief that the misunderstanding that can occur between people of different cultures may not be reducible exclusively to language difficulties but may also be attributable to different sets of experiences, different expectations and even profoundly different expectations and even profoundly different ways of thinking". Very often [Starkey and Osler, 2001: 314], "[...] xenophobia or racism may be an explanatory factor for the reluctance of some learners [...]" to learn the foreign language. The Council of Europe (1982) emphasizes upon the need of cooperation and mutual understanding among the people of different languages. This is also the stance taken by the Common European Framework of Foreign Languages (2001) as well as the new and more modern Greek Unified Curriculum for Foreign Languages (first presented as a draft in 2001) and the new English Language textbooks first introduced in 2006. Mutual cooperation and understanding thus becomes a first step against discrimination xenophobia and racism. The next very important step according to Starkey and Osler [2001: 315] towards "... the building of a world of freedom, justice and peace..." is "... the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights..." which "...attempts to build a new stable international order free from racism". We thus see that all the aforementioned international organizations cater for the protection of Human Rights which "... are essentially a guarantee of protection against discrimination. Human rights and anti-racism are therefore inseparable [Starkey and Osler, 2001:315]. The question is "whether Human Rights apply to all people, of all races and of both sexes" [2013], or to be more precise of all sexes, even the 'other' the 'different' [O' Mochain, 2009: 63-64].

Also, when teaching a foreign language through listening texts, or reading and writing texts it is important to "... infuse elements of multicultural education..." [Colon – Muniz, et al., 2010:63] so as to facilitate students towards the acceptance of the 'other' the 'different'. This does not mean that we do not cater for the cultural needs of the specific group of students towards which we direct our teaching but it is a way to help them acquire a "...consciousness for avoiding stereotypical assumptions about the international community..." [Colon – Muniz, et al., 2010:69]. This is why the Greek curriculum has integrated the teaching of culture into foreign language teaching

eventhough the teaching of culture is not a central curricular objective in other parts of the world [Menard - Warwick, 2009: 42]. Nevertheless the Greek curriculum promotes the teaching of culture and of the 'other', in an attempt to place "...emphasis on an understanding of [the] self as cultural subject and openness of mind toward cultural difference" [Knutson, 2006:591].

The teaching of culture has not, as yet, acquired the place it should rightfully have it the teaching of foreign languages in Greece. Yet as Tseng (2002: 11) mentions "...changes in linguistic and learning theory suggest that culture should be highlighted as an important element in language". Successful language learning goes hand in hand with the culture of the foreign language which is taught and as Tseng (2002:12) puts it "... without the appropriate cultural schema to aid understanding, what is learnt must necessarily be incomplete". The 'cultivation' of culture is thus brought to the forefront with Strasheim (in Tseng, 2002:12-13), "teaching and learning about the target culture can achieve at least two goals: 1. Perspective consciousness, [in which a learner recognizes that] he or she has a view of the world which is not universally shared, that this view of the world has been and continues to be shared by influences that often escape conscious detection, and that others have views of the world that are profoundly different from one's own, and 2. Cross-cultural awareness, [in which learners have] an awareness of the diversity of ideas and practices to be found in human societies around the world of how such ideas and practices compare, and include some limited recognition of how the ideas and ways of one's own society, might be viewed from other vantage points". Very often a student's success in foreign language learning depends on or is conditioned by the understanding of the culture of the foreign language. And as Tseng (2002:20) puts it "culture is not just a set of facts to be acquired by learners but something actively created by learners through interactions that focus on meaning making [...in this way...] culture can be learned as a process rather than as a collection of facts".

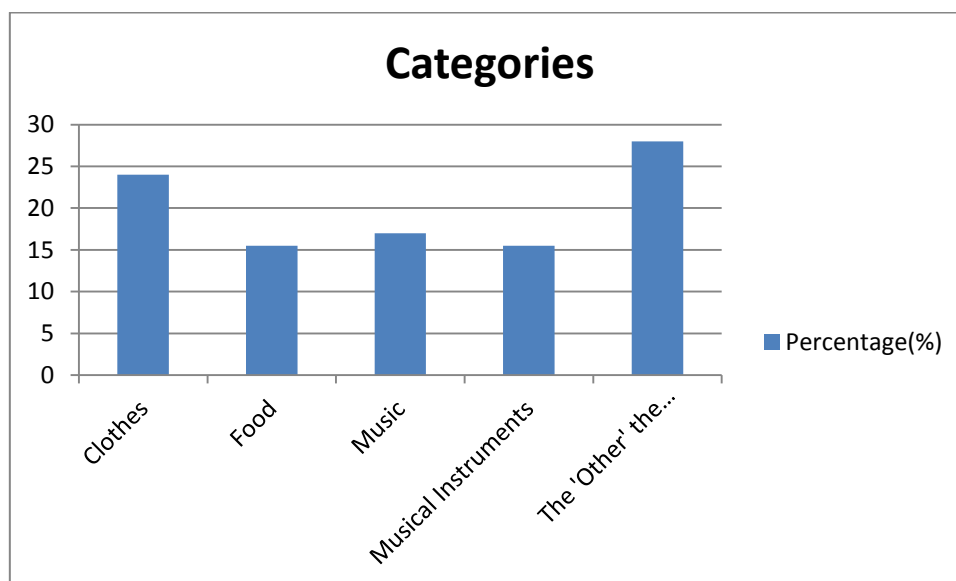
##### **5. The analysis of the Textbook 'English 6<sup>th</sup> Grade'**

The first unit starts with the heading 'Our multicultural class' thus giving young learners a foretaste of what is to follow. There is a map of the Balkans and the names of three countries are presented, Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey. The name of the fourth country, Italy is also presented even though Italy belongs to the south of Europe and is not part of the Balkans. Multiculturalism is further presented by the Ukraine (described as the second largest country in Europe), Poland, Moldavia, Russia, Albania, Serbia, Montenegro and Georgia. We are also introduced to the Adriatic Sea, the Ionian and the Black Sea. Young learners are also introduced to Great Britain through Alice who is a pen-friend. Great Britain is further presented by Gwen who is Welsh from her father's side but who is now living in Oxford, England. Through Gwen, young learners are taught the geography of The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and are further told that it includes England, Wales and Scotland. It is stressed that Britain is multicultural, as people from different countries and races, of different religious, social, economic and political back grounds live there, and that people from Asia, Africa or the Caribbean who live there speak English, as well as the language of their fathers. The fact that Great Britain is multicultural and accepts the 'other' is explicit in the sentence "I think it's exciting to live in Great Britain because it opens its doors to everyone!" [Efremiadou, et al. 2006:10]. India is presented in the textbook by the Taj Mahal. Unfortunately, Latin America, the United States of America, Canada, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, China, Japan and many more countries are not presented thus limiting the cultural elements of other countries to Europe, Turkey and Russia.

**TABLE- 1: Cultural Elements**

Categories	Cases	Percentage(%)
Clothes	11	24
Food	7	15,5
Music	8	17
Musical Instruments	7	15,5
The 'Other' the 'Different'	13	28
Total	46	100

Elements of culture and history are found on page 34 in which characters from ancient Greek history come to life. Hermia meets and falls in love with Lysander but her father wants her to marry Demetrius. The couple, who are in love, escape to the forest where the queen of fairies, the 'other', the 'different', queen Titania is arguing with her husband Oberon. The scene which is being depicted here is of an everyday couple, even though in this case the couple is 'different' as it is the 'other', the fairies. Unfortunately, the 'other' the 'different' is not always depicted positively in the textbook. In unit 3 'Old and modern creatures', the 'other' is depicted as a monster, as is the case of the Cyclops. The text on page 27 which talks about fairies is so derogatory that the 'other' the 'different' is depicted as dangerous, "They [the fairies] behave like humans [...]. However, unlike humans, they have supernatural powers, which make them, at best, unpredictable and at worst, dangerous" [Efremiadou, 2006:27]. And again on page 28 in exercise A in which case Shrek, who is considered a monster, is depicted as "...more horrible than him [meaning the Cyclop Polyphemus]. When he looks at himself in the mirror he is frightened. He is the ugliest of all creatures on this page" [Efremiadou, 2006:28].

**Graph-1: Cultural Elements**

History and myth are depicted on page 37 with 'The history of the aeroplane' in which case Daedalus and Icarus become the first people to fly, followed historically by the Wright Brothers in 1903.



Culture is also presented through art. On page 46 the well-known artist Pieter Brueghel (Belgium) painted a picture with the Fall of Icarus in 1558. Elements of culture are also found in music (unit 8. music is presented as something universal (for example on page 89 the pop music of New England is presented). The ‘different’ the ‘other’ is presented as an everyday person, in the musical ‘Scary wolf’ on page 87. The wolf becomes “...a comic character and students learn important lessons about life” (Efremiadou, et al. 2006:87). Elements of traditional Greek music and culture are also found on page 87-89 in which case Greek musical instruments (the zourna, the daouli) and Greek folk music, song and dance are presented. Unfortunately, here again musical instruments of other countries are not presented. Cultural elements are also found in unit 10, in which case, through books, magazines and films, young students come into contact with the completely ‘different’, the ‘other’, a baby alien (page 114) who is lost on Earth and is found by a 10 year old boy called Elliot who protects him and takes care of the little creature and who treats it as though it is human. Elements of culture are also found on page 122-123 in which case food is depicted as a universal need rather than a culture specific need. Whereas in unit 2 the same does not apply for clothing, here it is very clear that clothing of the western culture is only presented. No mention is made of traditional clothing or clothing of other civilizations or cultures.

Stereotypes are unfortunately not avoided in this text book. Gender roles continue to exist and are very vivid in the case of jobs and careers as these appear in unit 6. Women are associated with feminine jobs such as a nurse, a hairdresser, a jewellery designer, whereas men are presented in more masculine jobs such as an air traffic controller, a lifeguard, a doctor, a car mechanic or a farmer.

**TABLE-2: Gender Roles**

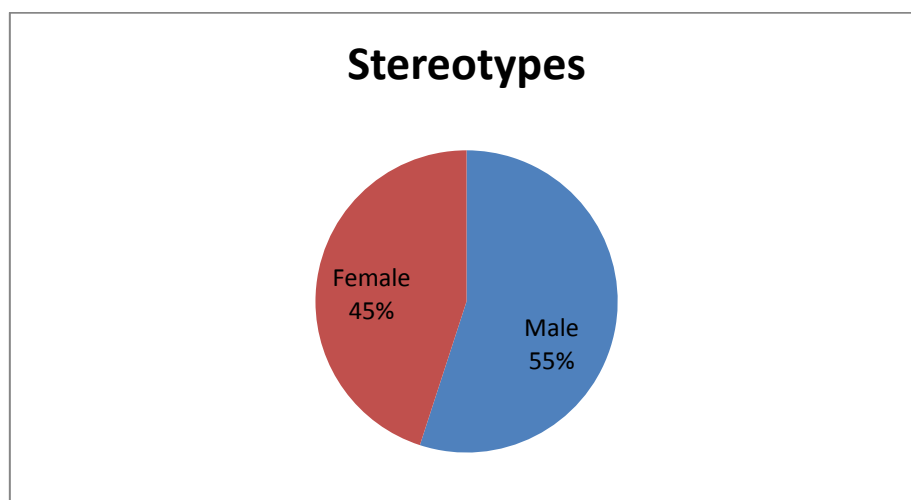
Categories	Cases	Percentage(%)
Male	11	55
Female	9	45
Total	20	100

Sports (see page 68), as well as vigorous and/or dangerous activities (see page 33 in which batman is presented as a strong man) are also only presented by male characters (see page 73). Olympic gold medalists (unit 7) are presented by males only. For instance, the swimmer Ian James Thorp (on page 74), Pyrros Dimas the weight lifter (on page 130) or the gymnast Dimosthenis Tabakos (on page 79) or even in the case of the Paralympics where the champions are, once more, only men, Kostas Fykas from Greece and Ben Austin from Australia.

The textbook has very little to say about female film stars, only male superstars seem to dominate unit 10 of the book (Sean Connery, Pierce Brosnan, etc). Even the nurturing role of the alien baby (page 114) is given to a male character (Elliot). The only case in which women are presented as having any interest in learning a skill is in the appendix section on page 129 in which case Maria “...likes machines very much and wants to learn how they operate...” (Efremiadou, et al.2006:129). The text which is only a few lines is followed by three pictures showing Maria as a car mechanic, a pilot and a lifeguard. I have also stressed the expression “...wants to learn...” because it is as if the writers of the book are telling us that she is not capable, or ready or perhaps even sure that she wants to do the aforementioned jobs or at least one of them. The arts are also represented almost solely by men. Music is presented by Dimitris Sgouros the pianist, books, novels and plays are presented by Charles Dickens and William Shakespeare, so are film directors who are represented by Steven Spielberg. Kiki Dimoula, who is a well-known poet is the only woman

writer who is presented on page 79 of the book. The majority of the illustrations of the book also depict male characters (235 cases) rather than female characters (150 cases) which is almost half the amount of times the male characters are presented.

**Graph 2 : Gender Roles**



## 6. Concluding Remarks

This paper delved into the need for teaching English as a foreign language in Greek primary schools, and more specifically the teaching of English to sixth grade primary school students. This level of English language was chosen because students are preparing for Junior High school which is a vast environmental and educational change for these students. On the other hand students should gradually be prepared for the 'adult society' of which they will become a part of in the near future. Since the Ministry of Education permits the use of only one textbook, in both public and private schools, it becomes necessary to cater for the needs of both sexes. It should also introduce young learners to other cultures, including multiculturalism, and it should guide students to the understanding and respect of the 'other' the 'different'. English, as a foreign language, should be taught without stereotypes and prejudice and with respect for the 'other' the 'different'.

In the case of 'English 6<sup>th</sup> Grade' there has been an attempt to teach the foreign language by incorporating elements of culture in the teaching process. Emphasis was initially given, in the Unified Curriculum for Foreign Languages, to multiculturalism, multilingualism, as well as pluriculturalism and plurilingualism. The aim of this paper was two – fold, in other words, firstly to conduct a qualitative research on the new sixth grade textbook which is used in all primary schools in Greece for the teaching of English as a foreign language, as to whether these books incorporate cultural elements of English speaking countries or cultural elements of other language groups and countries. Secondly, if these new textbooks not only enhance and enrich language competence but also cultural competence which can lead to the respect of the 'other', the 'different', thus encouraging communicative competence. The purpose of this research was to examine whether the 'English 6<sup>th</sup> Grade' textbook teaches English as a foreign language to students of 12-13 years of age without prejudice and without the use of stereotypes. More particularly it posed the following research questions:

Do gender differences exist (as concerning occupations, toys, etc.) in the textbook?

Is racial, religious, political and social prejudice found in reading and listening texts?

Is the 'other,' the 'different' depicted positively in the textbook?

What characteristics of the ‘other’ the ‘different’ exist in the textbook and how are they depicted?

How is culture and multiculturalism depicted in the textbook?

Findings show that the ‘other,’ the ‘different’ is only partially depicted positively as there are cases in the textbook such as Shrek and/or the Cyclops who are presented as very ugly monsters, just because they are different. Gender differences are also very vivid, the male is dominant and the female gender is under presented. References to females are few and illustrations in the textbook are even fewer. Cultural elements of Eastern and Western Europe, Russia, the Balkans, and Turkey are presented but not of the rest of the world. Unfortunately much work still needs to be done in this field and it is impermissible that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century such vivid gender differences still exist.

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