National Curriculum Reform and New Elementary
School Language Arts Textbooks in Greece

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The Characteristics, Innovations and Methodological Directions of the National Curriculum for Language Arts and the Specifications for New Textbooks

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Abstract: Curriculum reform in education is dependent on the recognition of changes in the world around us as well as advances made in theory and praxis. Such reform needs to be founded on inclusive and well-designed plans as well as on efforts of policy makers and stakeholders to successfully implement these reforms. The purpose of this paper is to present the reforms initiated by the newly legislated Language Arts curriculum for the Greek Elementary School. The new language arts curriculum represents a move from a higher-end closed curriculum to a lower-end open curriculum. It introduces important changes in the Greek elementary school practice including the formal adoption of specifically defined cross-thematic and communicative text-oriented approaches, as well as collaborative and critical teaching/learning within a multicultural society. We contrast these changes with the previous national curriculum in terms of teaching practices and philosophy. The changes noted in the new curriculum with respect to language teaching are linked with contemporary language learning and teaching theory. The reforms outlined, while not necessarily new, are however highly innovative from the vantage point of the Greek educational reality. Furthermore, in this paper we outline the framework and specifications used to develop the new textbooks and teaching materials.

Keywords: Curriculum Reform, Open Versus Closed Curriculum, Innovation, Language Arts, Elementary Education, Cross-Thematic Teaching, Multiculturalism, Self-Evaluation and Reflection, Critical Language Awareness, Textual Competence, Text-types, Project Method

"Educational transformations are always the result and the symptom of the social transformations in terms of which they are to be explained. For a people to feel at any given moment the need to change its educational system, it is necessary that new ideas and needs have emerged for which the old system is no longer adequate. But these needs and ideas do not arise spontaneously…" Durkheim (1977:92-105)

Introduction

CHANGE IN EDUCATION is dependent on continuous curriculum reform. Such reform needs to be founded on inclusive and well-designed plans as well as on efforts of policy makers and stakeholders to successfully implement these reforms.

Beginning in the latter half of the twentieth and now in the twenty-first century, new curriculum content and teaching strategies ask that students not only master factual knowledge but learn to apply that knowledge. If the reform is successful, content and pedagogical characteristics of instruction will need to change dramatically (Porter, Archbald, & Tyree, 1991).

Education reform is a recurrent theme in the Greek political arena. As Mattheou (2003) points out, over the last forty years, various reforms have been enacted, with the number of other minor reforms even greater. As the Greek educational system, historically, represents a highly centralized system, education reform has been the exclusive responsibility of the state.

The current Greek curriculum reform comes to respond to researchers' discussions and analyses centered on the past curriculum's lack of efficacy as a means of developing the skills and abilities needed to be an effective and proactive citizen. Specifically, in the domain of the language arts curriculum, reviews of several studies note the absence of literacy-based instructional methods focused on teaching genres (i.e. Fterniati & Spinthourakis, 2004). These studies argued that contemporary Greek language teaching practice promoted a sentence-based view of language with teaching lacking interactive opportunities and very limited socio-cultural and communicative discourse dimensions. Teachers, spending little if any time on the actual

teaching of writing, focused on the surface requirements of language arts.

While the previous held true in Greece, in many other developed countries from the 1980s onwards various proposals supporting curricular change with text-oriented teaching and materials use were presented and ultimately were adopted in both policy and practice. These proposals focused on text production and processing which need to be integrated into wider communicative activities through the use of critical methods (e.g. Cope & Kalantzis, 1993; McCarthy & Carter, 1994; Ministère de l'Education Nationale, 1992). Positive results require enhancing the child's active cooperation and interaction with his/her peers in groups and the teacher, as language production is perceived as an interactive social process. This has special importance in view of the various dimensions of social multi-literacy in a multicultural society (Kress, 1998*)*. More specifically, an emphasis on enhancing various strategies to produce specific and appropriate text-types, using the knowledge-transforming model of writing and a writing process versus a product-focused orientation, appears to be fundamental to effective discourse use (McArthur et al., 1994; Stern 2001). These proposals were predicated on the premise that written discourse instruction is more effective when focused on tasks dealing with creating various text-types. In this context, the use of morpho-syntactic structures enables students to see how various linguistic elements can be combined to construct an effective text. Thus, curriculum's which espoused a comparative study of various authentic texts from the social environment appeared to help students understand the true value of textual commun-ication.

General Principles

The specific curriculum analysis attempts to outline its elements and character and to present innovations it proposes to introduce and the skills it aims to enhance. Its content, and foundations it is predicated on, are discussed.

The National Curriculum (NC) reform, whose genesis can be traced to 1998, was finally legislated in 2003 (FEK 303 and 304/13-3-2003). Full implementation begins in the academic year 2006-2007 since along with the NC implementation, new school textbooks, the first since the early 1980s, are also to be introduced.

Specific differences between this NC and all those that preceded it is predicated on a number of factors. These include its different philosophy, on its adoption, understanding and adaptation to newer tried-and-tested teaching methodologies, conceptions and behaviors as well as content enrichment and introduction of new objectives (*Glossa*, 2002).

The new NC represents the first time in the history of Modern Greek education that a unified curriculum versus an analytic program-of-studies is introduced. Thus, it is a curriculum that can be seen as "an attempt to communicate the essential properties and features of an educational proposal in such a form that it is open to critical scrutiny and capable of effective translation into practice" (Stenhouse, 1975:4). It deals with the entire teaching/learning process, including materials, examinations, and is flexible in how it can be implemented. In contrast, the old NC was highly didactic, rigid and detailed all facets of its implementation (van Lier, 1996; Posner & Rudnisky, 1997).

As with most contemporary curriculums, it is a complex result of study of various relative disciplines, teaching approaches and pedagogical theories (FEK 303-304/2003:3745). It combines contemporary approaches with elements determined appropriate to the Greek language and reality, including relevant teaching habits and practices identified. This is to avoid the negative and limiting consequences of implementing a single model. Furthermore, for national implementation, a single model is often inadequate as it fails to address the needs of different situations references to.

The new elementary school Language Arts NC is made up of the following organizational elements (FEK: 3745-3777):

- didactic objectives, common to two grades (1st-2nd, 3rd-4th and 5th-6th) concerned with production and understanding of oral and written discourse (reading, writing, and literature), vocabulary, grammar and information management,
- content,
- methodological suggestions,
- didactic approaches, teaching materials/means, the new textbook specifications, evaluation and cross-thematic learning.

The new NC is more condensed in relation to earlier versions and in contrast to these gives greater emphasis to objectives and processes versus content and material (Solomon, 1998). The number and broadness of the objectives do not result in increasing either teaching material or more time-on-task as teachers, especially with language arts, can use the same material to meet several different objectives (i.e. it is possible using a single text to assess amongst other things, issues of sentence and text structure, effectiveness and appropriateness of discourse, vocabulary usage, genre conventions). Following the guideline-priorities set by the new NC, the textbooks are not expansive (FEK:3777). The conciseness required of the textbook authors necessitates activities that promote the simultaneous

development of different skills. Moreover, many of the general objectives and activities suggested are not necessarily intended for completion within the language class, but are part of the concept of *'language across the curriculum'* (FEK: 3772, 3775).

Thus, the NC exemplifies the characteristics of comparable contemporary curriculums of many European Union member states (OECD, 1998; OECD, 2004). Some of these characteristics which are priorities emphasize communication skills, problem-solving skills, information management and self-improvement (Costa, 2001; Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2000). More specifically, communication ability is the axis on which the NC is constituted. Discourse comprehension and production is regarded as problem-solving, as systematic practice is promoted through specific processes. With respect to information management, a specific group of objectives is established, which make up 'horizontal objectives' of the NC (FEK:3748, 3770-1).

'Information' is not limited to computer use, but refers to the bulk of data encountered daily by a member of a contemporary society. Thus, information "management" means localization, comprehension, choice, analysis, summarizing, interpretation, extension, classification, and, generally, its exploitation. Therefore, we refer to a complex skill, which encompasses critical language awareness. To a large degree, it is from this skill that the success of the learning process and time management is determined (Goatly, 2000). It is for this reason that it is perceived as a major pedagogical skill, contributing to the education of students and future citizens by allowing them to develop evaluation skills needed to be both successful decoder and transmitter of messages. In this framework, language is perceived not as an autonomous text, but as a central body of information amongst others (i.e. pictures, semiotics), as we see in the example of multimode texts.

Cross- Thematic Teaching/Learning

A recently introduced innovation of NC, common for all subjects and not only language arts, is cross-thematic teaching/learning (Alahiotis & Karatzia, 2006). This innovation has been introduced to work in tandem with the traditional single separate subject/discipline approach to teaching/learning, which in the past was the only approach exploited. It is presumed that through this innovation students will amass a body of knowledge and skills, a wholistic awareness of knowledge that allows the forming of personal perspectives on related scientific topics as well as commonplace issues. The cross-thematic approach is supported by active and experiential acquisition of knowledge, implemented through teaching of subject areas and cross-thematic activities. A student-centered approach with peer and group learning is promoted allowing students opportunities to develop initiatives, become active and participate with responsibility in the learning process.

An example of how this innovation can be realized is through implementation of the 'flexible zone'. The flexible zone is a specified period of time set aside within the school schedule (4hrs/wk: 1st-2nd grade; 3hrs/wk: 3rd-4th grade; 2hrs/wk: 5th-6th grade) wherein cross-thematic activities/projects are conducted. In the flexible zone, the theme or topic is of primary importance and whose choice depends on the how important and useful it is considered by the students. Projects allow teachers to become familiar with the functional approach to language learning.

Another means of promoting cross-thematic learning/teaching relates to linking subjects/disciplines horizontally through shared basic concepts and can be allocated 10% of the teaching time of each subject.

Promoting cross-thematic teaching/learning has as its objective the enhancement of basic values and attitudes and the acquisition of skills that contemporary knowledge based societies demand (EC, 1996). Within the framework of the NC these are the skill of discourse comprehension and production, communication and cooperation skills, which comprise examples of skills referenced throughout European member-states NCs and other developed states. In these NCs, the term *literacy* is seen as the competence that encompasses all the above mentioned sub-skills.

Aims and Objectives

The fundamental aim of the NC is to enable the student to use linguistic means effectively and appropriately for all types of discourse and situational contexts (FEK: 3745). This is the reason the NC recommends the text as the basic communication unit versus the sentence which was the old standard.

The relationship between language and reality is the basis for the NC. More specifically it aims at bolstering the student skills in relation to, referring, influencing, transforming to the degree possible and even creating reality (FEK: 3745, 3772). Language is perceived, within its complexity, as a whole and with which the child interacts. Consequently, it can be seen as a topic of study as both an abstract system of relationships as well as a function of the system in realistic situations. Language is also a means of promoting intellectual, creative and critical thinking. The priority status given to developing communicative ability through a wide range of text-

types and language functions is difficult at best to be realized merely within the language arts class even using multiple textbooks. Thus, the NCs directive, "*each language arts teaching objective is by its definition a horizontal objective found in all subjects, of the school program and school reality*" (FEK: 3772) is fundamental. This means, that among other things, various communicative activities are designated in such a way as to be used through the other subjects. In this case, the role of the language arts textbook is to provide the student with basic concepts for discourse study and use, thus opening the way to maximize communicative opportunities afforded in other subjects and throughout their school reality.

For the teacher who has traditionally dealt with language teaching exclusively through linguistic analysis, the NC provides sample directions promoting communicative context as the teaching framework. This represents an innovation in the teaching methodology for the majority of Greek teachers and requires a change of attitude and practice on their part. Therefore, they now need to deal with:

- Different types of discourse versus one or none
- Basic relationship of grammar to text-type
- Definition of the specific communicative situational context (audience, purpose) for the production of discourse through systematic process
- Teachers taking the initiative within the framework of a more open ended curriculum versus that of being an executor of a close-ended curriculum (Solomon, 1998).

These responsibilities have as a prerequisite knowledge of objectives, an awareness and realization of the need for continuing education, training and guidance (FEK: 3772-4).

As far as the book specifications are concerned, the NC suggests approaches, philosophical, linguistic and pedagogical contexts, leaving the method and the educational practices as the responsibility of the textbook authors (FEK: 3777). One of the reasons for this is that the broad scope of approaches suggested, allows flexibility in terms of creative initiative taking, material and activity choices. Additionally, the fact that there were different teams of writers producing the separate textbooks and other teaching materials allowed for a wider representation of teaching ideas to be presented.

The book specifications are the product of the review of years of research in language arts didactics and methodology from both the Greek and international academic community perspective. Thus, the end products available to teachers and students include: Language Arts Textbook and Workbook, Grammar Textbook, Dictionary, Literature Anthology, and analogous interactive computer software. They are all linked and have their respective teacher's guidebooks but through which connections to other materials and experiences are possible.

Text Typology

Another innovation of the NC is the introduction of a typology of texts which is useful for education and more specifically primary education (FEK: 3773). The texts are divided into the following categories: a) referential (narrative, descriptive) and b) directive (argumentative, directions) according to their use and their function in the communication act (Georgakopoulou & Goutsos, 1997; McCarthy & Carter, 1994). In other words, the NC aims to cultivate the comprehension and producing of discourse which can range from very experiential (allows the author to express themselves) to strictly utilitarian. It is not difficult to imagine the drastic change in language arts teaching needed when this innovation is taken into consideration. This becomes clearer given that heretofore the emphasis has only been on comprehension and limited processing through the presentation and work on a very specific kind of text, essentially the narrative, without highlighting textual structure and organization. A similar situation existed with respect to discourse production where topics were given without differentiating the communication framework and text-type.

Grammar

The NC introduces an extended conception of 'grammar'. Specifically, the scope of the 'grammar' introduced, focuses on word, sentence and text level (FEK: 3774). The word level corresponds to the subject of morpho-phonology while that of the sentence corresponds to the syntax. With respect to the text, the grammar deals with on the one hand, the traditional means of teaching such as the structure of the paragraph and the wider meaning. While on the other hand, it also deals with the functions and characteristics as promoted by contemporary discourse analysis and pragmatics such as cohesion, coherence, intent, appropriateness, acceptability, text-type and the communicative purpose. The NC, especially for text level grammar, emphasizes speech acts. Noteworthy is the fact that the entire text is treated as a speech act at a macro-structure level (Knapp & Watkins, 1994).

Generally, the teaching of language use has a base connection with teaching of the linguistic system, given that required teaching content is comprised of the linguistic means that pertain to different language

usage. Moreover, the NC provides the framework for genre-based literacy.

Teaching Discourse Production

The radical change in the teaching approach (FEK: 3773-4) is expected to have far-reaching effects on teacher attitudes with respect to writing production teaching methodologies. These changes are expected to result in teaching which promotes:

- Active and engaged writing,
- Discourse production teaching for/with which:
  - Frameworks and means are provided,
  - Children are involved,
  - Teachers take part,
  - A process is followed.

The constant and conscious teaching objective is to assure that each student is: continuously exposed to discourse production, engaged in situations that can serve as catalysts to enable them to produce deliberate and effective discourse according to their age and experiences (Hayes 2000; Kellogg 1994; Kress, 1994).

The conception that text composition is a three stage overlapping process (prewriting/writing/editing) is introduced. According to the NC, suggested activities for each stage are as follows: Stage 1—production and organization of ideas; Stage 2—writing the first draft; and Stage 3—editing the draft towards creation of the final product (Flower & Hayes 1994).

Phonemic awareness is emphasized in relation to the initiation of reading and writing skills. In contrast to the past wherein the stated methodologies were predicated on graphic-phonemic-correspondence and combined-analytic-synthetic approaches, multiple teaching methodologies can now be employed such as the whole language and emergent literacy (FEK: 3774).

Evaluation

Another essential innovation is the change in the conception of what evaluation entails. Whereas in the past, evaluation and indeed only summative, was the task of the teacher, now the student also takes on a prominent role with respect to self and peer-evaluation. In particular, self-evaluation constitutes a basic aim for the entire education experience. Evaluation though is not limited to merely student and teacher (who now takes on diagnostic, formative as well as summative evaluation) but encompasses the teaching methods and materials as well as the actual NC. The NCs foresight in including this has as its aim to create an evaluation culture wherein various components of education are included in a process that has as its goal the continuous improvement of education.

More specifically, the main language arts evaluation criterion has to do with the effectiveness of each speech genre with respect to the purpose the student sets and its acceptability. Errors are dealt with as indications of intermediate communicative competence level and are used as diagnostic elements which allow the teacher to construct intervention strategies (FEK: 3773, 3776-7).

Rendering the student responsible for the discourse produced is a constant objective for the teacher, inculcating the student with a sense of personal responsibility. In this manner the student is actively involved in continuously upgrading his/her linguistic standard. The multifaceted self-evaluation processes are introduced from the first grade onwards and change students from passive receptors to active participants in the teaching/learning process as well as contributing to the development of their meta-linguistic and meta-cognitive skills (Couzijn, 1995; Milian-Gubern, 1996).

Language As a Cultural and Social Phenomenon

It should be noted that the NCs focus is not limited to linguistic objectives, but also includes cultural and socialization objectives (FEK: 3745). These afford support to the conception that language is a cultural and social product and phenomenon (Kalantzis & Cope, 2001; Kress, 1998). Towards this end the NC:

> recommends an 'opening' to the literature of neighboring countries, allows for acquainting the student with the localized Greek dialects and socio-linguistic variants, takes into consideration the difficulties that may be encountered when teaching students with a different mother tongue.

Efforts are made to include elements related to synchronic, diachronic and international language dimensions. Dimensions include identity, cultural traditions and communication channels towards the European and global society (Collins & Blot, 2003). On the other hand, an easily identifiable fact (deriving from Pragmatics) is that language is a means of human action and interaction as well as comprehension, expression, description and transformation/creation of reality. Moreover, language is a vehicle and result of art and aesthetic culture. Even clearer is the fact that language is heterogeneous with respect to social and geographic variants as well as differentiated linguistic registers which can affect the other school subjects and education generically (Eggins & Martin, 1998).

Dealing with Differences/Otherness

The manner in which difference/otherness (i.e., linguistic, racial, religious) are approached within the NC is also of interest (FEK: 3774), as it is an issue that appears to not to be easily dealt with within many contemporary NCs (Slattery 1995). Taking into consideration the multicultural characteristics of contemporary Greek society, language is seen as a vehicle for the social integration of the nonnative student. Thus, for these situations, measures are taken to help the students develop their second language communicative competency skills.

Furthermore, the NC specifically takes into consideration the active involvement of children with special education needs (FEK: 3774-5). The NC notes that their particular situation requires the designing of a rich and diversified language specific IEP (Individual Education Plan) developed in conjunction with specialists and parents (Wilmshurst & Brue, 2005).

Literature

Finally, the NC recognizes and explicitly references the importance of literature by designating it as a separate sector (FEK: 3775). This specific differentiation is based on the conception that literature is the area of discourse 'art' ($\tau\acute{\epsilon}\chi\nu\eta$), while the language teaching mainly has as its focal point the area of discourse 'technique' ($\tau\epsilon\chi\nu\iota\kappa\acute{\eta}$), in as much as every text-type is comprised of and perceived through linguistic means.

According to the new NC philosophy, the partial separation of literature text teaching from that of language teaching is judged necessary. This is predicated on the determination that literature plays a significant role in language and more generally influences the aesthetic enhancement of the individual. It does so by helping students become sensitized to the important life issues. In the previous NCs, 'great' literature was incorporated in the content of the textbooks as unique examples of written discourse. Now, while literature's value and importance is recognized, literature texts are not considered the only or for that matter appropriate examples of written discourse to which the student should be exposed.

At the same time, literature is linked with 'play', entertainment, sentiment enhancement as well as the problem-dialogue paradigm (Bassnet & Grundy, 1993; Carter & McRae, 1996). The NC recommends that literature texts be coupled with game-like activities either in the classroom or during their trips to the school library.

Conclusions

From our presentation we see that the new Greek elementary Language Arts curriculum makes a concentrated effort to change the *status quo*, moving from a traditional higher-end closed curriculum to a more flexible lower-end open curriculum paradigm (OECD, 1994). This innovation in Greek educational planning directly affects the role and practices of teachers and students as well as textbook authors.

Moreover, it makes an effort to:

- take into consideration the changes effecting and the world during the period separating the current curriculum (1998-2003) from that of the former one (1982-85),
- avoid the deficits of the former curriculum identified over its multiple year implementation,
- take into consideration noteworthy language arts curricula currently being implemented internationally,
- integrate tried instructional approaches from within the Greek experience as well as from other countries that are a result of language acquisition and teaching research.

Toward this end, the NC also sets out the framework and specifications used to develop the new textbooks which include an emphasis on:

- cross-thematic teaching
- emergent literacy and whole language approaches,
- collaborative and cooperative approaches to processing authentic texts from our social environment to be integrated into wider communicative activities using critical methods,
- teaching written language production using text typology and text composition conception wherein writing as a process is highlighted,
- developing a reflective culture surrounding the issue of evaluation with a focus on self-evaluation and peer-evaluation,
- multiculturalism within modern Greek society,
- individual differences,
- communicative skills, problem-solving, information management and critical language awareness.

In conclusion, the new curriculum makes significant efforts towards promoting instructional change in the way language arts and all subjects are taught. The successful implementation of the new NC needs to be based on appropriately designed materials, continuing in-service instruction of educators as well as informed and supportive school subject advisors to serve as methodology facilitators. Together they create a frame of authentic and more

effective praxis which can lead to students who will become engaged, literate and critical citizens in the twenty-first century.

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