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'Multilingualising' Language Education: A Teacher Training Programme for English as a 'Bridge Language' in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

This article outlines a teacher training programme called: "English in the Kindergarten: Towards Multilingual Education", which was designed and implemented as a response to the introduction of English in Greek state preschools from 2021 onward. The programme aims to develop teachers' knowledge, skills, and attitudes for the introduction of the English language as a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural bridge and ultimately to promote multilingualism and inclusion in the class. It is theoretically grounded on a critical sociolinguistic approach toward languages in education, which valourises the children's entire linguistic repertoire and challenges 'parallel monolingualisms' that typify some initiatives in the field of early (foreign) language education. Classes are reimagined as spaces where learners and teachers engage with age-appropriate experiential and plurilingual practices, art-based learning, drama techniques, and puppetry. At the same time, pluralistic approaches and translanguaging are proposed to be used to leverage children's linguistic and cultural capitals as they engage with English in early language education, thus enhancing multilingual and intercultural awareness. After discussing the theoretical tenets of the program's design, an overview of its structure and sample activities is provided as well as extracts from participant teachers' output and data from its evaluation. The paper concludes with the implications of the programme and the perspective it advances.

Keywords*:* 'Multilingualising' education, English as a bridge language, early childhood education, teacher training, inclusion

1. Introduction

Early Language Learning (ELL) at the pre-primary level has become a global trend. This pedagogical trend is often premised on discourses that highlight the benefits of ELL, including offering a gateway to multilingualism and intercultural awareness, and gains for the children's individual and social development (European Commission, 2011). Other

arguments include a purported development of positive attitudes towards multilingualism, openness to other languages and cultures, increased identity awareness and cognitive development, and general academic progress (e.g., Bland, 2015; Kirsch et al., 2020; Scheffler & Domioska, 2018). However, there seems to be little evidence of agreed processes or shared understanding across countries, lack of uniformity of approach, or established indices of success in the field of ELL (Mourão & Lourenço, 2015). Initiatives to teach additional languages to very young children are often implemented before the scientific, pedagogical, and methodological underpinnings have fully matured (Enever, 2004; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2017). A scarcity of appropriately trained teachers and a paucity of targeted teaching materials and resources are some important challenges in many settings, including Greece.

In addition to the practical problems outlined above, concerns have been raised about the dominance of English as the most widely taught foreign language across Europe (Eurodice, 2017) and beyond it. Criticisms have focused on the hegemonic role of English (Pennycook, 2007; Phillipson, 1992, 2009) and the role of native speaker norms (Widdowson, 2003). Increasingly, scholarship in applied linguistics and language education is reorienting itself towards positions that acknowledge greater linguistic fluidity and more complex linguistic repertoires. They are also more aware of unjust social orders that language teaching can engender (García & Flores, 2012). Yet, despite this "multilingual turn" (Conteh & Meyer, 2014; May, 2014), a lot of ELT policies remain informed by monolingual perspectives (Kostoulas, 2019), viewing languages as separate, autonomous entities with clear linguistic boundaries), following English-only policies. They also often discourage language mixing to maximize exposure to the target language (Cenoz, 2019). The need to support teachers in shifting monolingual beliefs about language teaching in Early Language Education, which are still shaped by the 'native speaker ideal', is well documented in the literature (Weddington, 2021).

In this paper, an alternative perspective is put forward in teacher education and professional development, which uses English to foster, rather than suppress linguistic and cultural diversity. Such a perspective aims to propose an inclusive and multilingual approach to introducing English in Early Language Education, which can be used to embrace diversity in class, by giving space and voice to students' language repertoires including migrant, minoritized, and 'invisible' languages and language varieties. This perspective can address the need that "calls into question the traditional national underpinnings of foreign language (FL) teaching" (Kramsch, 2012, p. 109), by challenging the dual monolingualisms of the 'national language plus English' and building on complex, dynamically evolving linguistic repertoires and hybrid identities. We believe that, compared to some Teaching English to Young Learners initiatives, this perspective aligns with the discourses about linguistic repertoires, plurilingual and intercultural education (Recommendation CM/Rec, 2022). Based on extensive research evidence of the impact of pluralistic approaches and translanguaging pedagogies in language education as well as among young learners (Coehlo & Ortega, 2022; Kirsch & Seele, 2022; Helot et al, 2018) this teacher education programme proposes their integration into an approach to the introduction of English in early childhood education which can foster relations among languages, challenging linguistic hierarchies, and 'legitimizing' linguistic diversity thus promoting linguistic and social justice.

To demonstrate what such a perspective might look like, the teacher education programme: *English in the Kindergarten: Towards Multilingual Education* is presented and discussed. The programme aimed to develop Early Childhood Education and English language teachers' competences to introduce and approach English as a 'bridge language' that facilitates the relations between students' languages (first/school/home languages) and cultures aiming at fostering an inclusive, open learning environment in which all, both visible and 'invisible' languages and identities, are valued and voiced. We preface with some brief contextualizing comments on Greek preschool education. Following that, we theoretically position the programme, by developing the key concepts of 'English as a bridge', translanguaging, arts-based learning, and collaboration, i.e., the four tenets on which the programme is grounded. Next, we provide an overview of the programme structure and some sample activities. We discuss data drawn from the participant teachers' output in the course, i.e. their reflection and activities as well as their feedback from the programme evaluation survey. The paper concludes with remarks on the implications of the programme and the perspective it advances.

2. A Snapshot of the Greek Context of Early Childhood Education

Similarly with many other European countries, the Greek education system has faced considerable changes in the student demographics, as a result of the destabilization crises of the Middle East and North Africa, as well as, more recently, Ukraine. At the same time, important changes have been made in the school curriculum, often in a piecemeal and not fully coordinated way. These have included the revision of the National Curriculum and the introduction of the English language in Early Childhood Education. In the Greek context, two years of early childhood education are compulsory for children aged 4 and 5, and it is provided in preschools that are staffed by early education specialists. The school staff consists of typically university graduates, with at least four years of specialized studies in early childhood education. The curriculum is centrally organized at the national level, according to policies and curricular instructions set by the Ministry of Education and Religions, often in consultation with affiliated academic and political entities.

Recent years have seen an increase in the demographic complexity of preschool classes. This is partly due to the influx of children with a refugee and migrant background, many of whom are generally placed in school mainstream and reception classes unless they live in segregated refugee camps. A large number of second-generation migrant children attend preschool classes having different home languages (e.g., Albanian, Russian, Georgian) while, more recently, classes include children with a migrant/refugee background having multiple language repertoires including, among others, Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, Punjabi, Dari, Lingala. At the same time, the recently legislated provision for compulsory two-year, preschool attendance may have enriched classrooms with children of minority communities, such as Roma children, who might otherwise be discouraged from attending school. Despite such rich cultural and linguistic diversity present in class, and nominal aims in the curriculum towards the promotion of intercultural education and multilingualism, schools tend to be monolingual in terms of language policy, as teachers are faced with important challenges in fostering linguistic diversity in class leading to what has been termed as 'invisible bilingualism' (Gkaintartzi et al., 2011; 2015).

Recent educational policy[1] has prioritised the introduction of English in the Early Childhood curriculum, for two hours a week in all preschools of the country. Following a one-year piloting phase (2020-2021), English has been introduced nationally in preschools, using activities of a "creative and experiential nature". The introduction of English is officially assigned to both early education specialists and English language teachers who are expected to collaborate in joint activities. Thus, as teachers in preschools are not formally qualified to teach English, English language specialists are seconded to preschools for two hours per week to co-teach language courses. However, the rationale for this co-teaching approach is not explicitly articulated in the policy document.

The official aim of introducing the English language in preschool classrooms is to enrich the preschool curriculum, both methodologically and thematically. Emphasis is on the children's language and holistic development, with a view to developing multilingual awareness, intercultural communication and fostering active citizenship and identity in the modern multicultural society. Additionally, the English language is included and integrated into the current curriculum, promoting an exploratory and interdisciplinary approach to learning as well as the playful nature of learning. In accordance with the official policy, English is not introduced with a focus on developing target language proficiency *per se*, but rather to develop open attitudes toward linguistic and cultural diversity, multilingual awareness, and intercultural communication competence.

While the aims of the English in the preschool policy remain aspirational, and official training for in-service teachers on a national level has been implemented through rolling 20-hour online courses, many teachers (including pre-service teachers) may likely feel unready to introduce English at the preschool level. Furthermore, differences in the disciplinary backgrounds of language and early education teachers might be greater than could be bridged by individual online studies. Against the backdrop of linguistic hierarchies and inequalities reproduced in school education (Gkaintartzi et al., 2015), and to address the critical need to promote linguistic justice and equity, the professional development course *English in the Kindergarten: Towards Multilingual Education* was developed for teachers who are involved in language education in pre-school contexts. It proposes a theoretically robust pedagogical perspective towards languages and multilingualism which is presented in more detail in the following section.

3. Theoretical Principles and Design Concepts

English in the Kindergarten: Towards multilingual education is theoretically grounded on four key principles: (a) a reconceptualized role for English, as a 'bridge language'; (b) the perspective on communication in which linguistic competence involves the skillful use of language and semiotic resources from multiple languages; (c) an emphasis on the role of creativity and arts-based learning; and (d) a priority in collaboration and building local communities of learning.

[1] Ministerial Decision (F.80378/GD4/2021-Official Gazette 3311/B/26-7-2021) https://www.e-nomothesia.gr/kat-ekpaideuse/protobathmia-ekpaideuse/upourgike-apophase-ph80378-gd4-2021.html

3.1 English as a 'Bridge Language'

A central concern in the perspective that informs the teacher development programme is to challenge the hegemonic role of English, as the *de facto* language in ELL. To this end, we draw on pluralistic approaches to language education such as Eveil aux langues (Awakening to Languages; Beacco et al., 2016; Candelier, 2017; Coehlo & Ortega, 2020) and Linguistically Appropriate Practice (Chumak-Horbatch, 2012, 2019), and explore their potentialities for pre-school age children. Eveil aux langues is an outgrowth of the language awareness movement, and it refers to a broad set of pedagogical activities that are intended to foster awareness of linguistic diversity, by increasing the salience of multiple languages, even if these are not the ones explicitly taught at school (Candelier, 2017). In its simplest form, in the English preschool class, it could involve encouraging students to greet each other in their home languages in parallel with the languages taught, elicit or provide words in their home languages aside from English when introducing age-appropriate thematic vocabulary in English for numbers, colours, animals, family (Ben Maad, 2016). Integrating pluralistic approaches into the English language class could also involve working in parallel on several languages (with a focus on students' home languages), aside from English, comparing sounds and alphabets, while listening to stories, and songs, reading dual language books, playing games (Coehlo & Ortega, 2022; Grima, 2020). This perspective does not only concern the English or foreign language classroom exclusively and can be easily implemented cross-thematically into the general preschool curriculum. It is crucial whatsoever when introducing a foreign language among young learners to resist, at an early stage, the reproduction of 'parallel monolingualisms' and linguistic hierarchies enacted by dominant languages such as the school language and English.

Linguistically Appropriate Practice (LAP) (Chumak-Horbatch, 2012, 2019) builds on the trend towards developing contextually relevant ways of language learning (e.g., Kumaravadivelu, 2006) and challenging 'one-size-fits-all' methodological thinking with a focus on young immigrant children. Addressing preschool education, it can offer a guide for dealing with linguistically diverse classrooms to support multilingual teaching and learning. In the Greek context, this involves acknowledging that middle-class preschools in metropolitan areas, preschools in regions where minority languages are prevalent, and preschools in refugee camps (to name a few examples) are different linguistic ecologies, where different learning affordances are present. From these theoretical starting points, the concept of 'English as a bridge' has been developed. This involves designing and implementing English language activities that productively use the learners' entire linguistic and cultural repertoires, with a view not only to facilitating the achievement of language goals but also to valourise diversity and foster inclusion. For example, the creation of language portraits (Busch, 2012; Melo-Pfeifer, 2015; Soares et al., 2020) or oral/multimodal identity texts (Cummins & Early, 2011) offer space for young children to reflect on and showcase their home languages, even though the language of instruction and target language are English. Similarly, children might engage with multilingual story books (Ibrahim, 2020) in age-appropriate ways (e.g., interactive storytelling, and kinesthetic activities), while making connections to their cultural backgrounds.

3.2 Pedagogical Translanguaging

Related to the above, the pedagogical perspective that is put forward involves challenging the notion that (national) languages are ‘bounded entities’ that are acquired and used separately from each other (LiWei & Garcia, 2022). This is replaced with a notion of ‘language as social practice’ that emerges dynamically from the 'soft assembly' of semiotic resources that are present in a given communicative situation. In contexts where diverse linguistic backgrounds are present, the emergent language will likely draw on resources from multiple 'languages', i.e., through translanguaging. In contexts where the children's home languages are minoritized, pedagogical translanguaging can be strategically planned and activated by teachers to make the most of students' linguistic repertoires and experiences as language users (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020).

Recent work in applied linguistics has highlighted local agency and bottom-up processes in shaping English (Widdowson, 2003), or has reconceptualized English as a 'multilingua franca' (Jenkins, 2015) or a ‘translingual franca’ (Pennycook, 2010), a contact language that dynamically emerges in multilingual situations. The key notion that is foregrounded here is that of 'integrated competence', the ability of learners to make meaning by drawing on a broad repertoire of semiotic resources that are present in their homes, classes, and communities, as opposed to the performative reproduction of predefined curriculum content that represents an ‘ideal’ form of English. English is perceived and approached as an additional resource that can extend the students' existing repertoires by providing a bridging function (see above), or as a potential 'shared property' (Seidlhofer, 2007) that facilitates the combination of semiotic resources in the process of meaning-making and functions in relation to and not in competition with the children's language/cultural resources.

This perspective could be operationalized pedagogically through the practice of translanguaging, i.e., the deployment of "multiple discursive practices in which bilinguals engage to make sense of their bilingual worlds" (García, 2009, p. 49; see also Cenoz & Gorter, 2015, 2020; García & Li Wei, 2014). Activities facilitating pedagogical translanguaging include multilingual storytelling, the use of mentor texts (García & Kleifgen, 2019), language games, and the creation of multimodal identity texts or posters where multiple languages are visually present. In the context of such multilingual meaning-making, English (the bridge language) is “always potentially 'in the mix', with other languages”, as a “contact language of choice, which may or may not be chosen” (Jenkins, 2015, p. 73). That is to say, pedagogical translanguaging does not aim to replace English language competence, but rather to enrich it by acknowledging the complex ways in which English is intertwined with other language/semiotic resources that are available to speakers in any given communicative situation. Translanguaging is approached both as an ideology, i.e., a useful mindset for language teachers, and as an educational approach (pedagogical translanguaging; Cenoz & Gorter, 2020). Teachers are thus supported in integrating English with the students' other linguistic resources, fostering their ability to meaning by building on cross-linguistic links. The conscious and confident use of pedagogical translanguaging is encouraged, e.g., through the comparison of different language resources at different levels and using students' resources cross-linguistically (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020). Translanguaging (or ‘multilingualism with English’, Jenkins, 2015) is legitimized and encouraged in the classroom.

It is important to note that such 'multilingualising' practices depart from more conventional approaches to teaching, which emphasize maximum exposure to input in the target language. They are also, arguably, hard to connect with the ideological premises underpinning the introduction of English in preschool education in Greece, which questioned the linguistic adequacy of early education specialists and mandated the presence of English Language and Literature teachers to ensure that language standards are met (see also Cortina-Pérez & Andúgar, 2021). Indeed, challenging this 'monolingual habitus' which is often present even in the context of foreign language education (Gogolin, 1997) is an important goal of the teacher training programme that is presented.

3.3 Creativity and Arts-based Learning

A third theoretical tenet of the programme is creativity and art-based learning which can offer a broad range of affordances for linguistic development. It can create 'safe' spaces for children to experience linguistic and cultural diversity, and also to experiment with novel forms of linguistic (and nonlinguistic) expression. A non-exhaustive list of creative activities that can be used in early language learning includes Music, Singing, Drama in Education Techniques, Puppetry, Dialogical Drama with Puppets, Animating Objects, Visual Arts, etc. In addition to the intrinsic pedagogical value of fostering aesthetic development, such activities have the potential to make language learning more enjoyable and interesting for young learners and can be used to elicit language from preschoolers without the fear of academic performance (Vitsou et al., 2021; Chukueggu, 2012). In addition, creative and art-based activities are often unrestricted from the usual restrictions of verbal communication and provide great scope for imaginatively mixing semiotic resources, including elements from multiple languages. What this means is that such activities can give students in preschool education the opportunity to come in contact with, explore, and playfully experiment with the school language, the additional language taught, and other languages that they are aware of or competent in (e.g., a home or heritage language). By engaging in art-based activities, young learners have opportunities to express their voices, develop multicultural awareness, take pride in their heritage, and recognize their role in, respond to, and participate in the world at large through the arts (De Jesus, 2016; Robinson, 1997; Schröter & MolanderDanielsson, 2016). In sum, such an approach to learning may contribute towards the creation of an inclusive ethos, which highlights the importance and value of linguistic and cultural diversity (Faltis, 2019).

To illustrate using an example, one activity that can be used to foster language development is the use of *Kamishibai*, a Japanese form of street theatre, in which a performer narrates a story with the support of images. Drawing attention to the multitude of affordances that such a multimodal, theatre-based way of expression generates, this could involve the collaborative creation of the images that will later be connected in a narrative using prompts in English, or joint storytelling where learners contribute segments in their languages, which are later connected in a combined narrative in English, and more (Faneca et al., 2018). The focus is not on specific techniques, but rather on developing awareness of texts that can be theatrically performed and involve the participation and interaction of children as protagonists in the process (MárquesIbañez, 2017), while creating and performing a multilingual story that expose children to linguistic diversity.

3.4 Fostering Collaboration

The final tenet of the perspective that underpins this teacher education programme is that teaching is collaboration. In its simplest form, this involves developing competencies for the type of co-teaching that is mandated by the policy documents, i.e., the joint planning and delivery of language classes. More broadly, it involves fostering the growth of Communities of Practice, i.e., groups of professionals with similar interests and concerns who interact regularly to learn how to better address these issues (Wenger, 1998).

The challenges of co-teaching and cooperation among teachers are well documented in the literature (e.g., Arkoudis, 2006; Hersi et al., 2016; Park, 2014; Schwarz & Gorgatt, 2017). To this one might add the possibility that the introduction in pre-schools of teachers who have a very different academic and professional background can have a disruptive effect. Such concerns were a recurring theme in the discourse of several teachers who were interviewed by the project team in the context of the needs analysis that was conducted before the design of the teacher education programme. Within the programme, teachers were acquainted with multiple models of co-teaching, and provided with opportunities to experiment with them experientially and also reflect on them. This way of work is, again, premised on the notion of contextually appropriate practice (Kumaravadivelu, 2006) and on a commitment to developing teacher autonomy. The concept of 'integration', appropriated from Content and Language Integrated Teaching (CLIL), was included by supporting teachers in designing objectives and activities that serve dual (linguistic and non-linguistic) learning goals e.g., developing numeracy skills, and learning how to name the numbers in a new language.

4. Structure, Sample Activities, and Teachers' Output

The professional development program has been provided as a distance learning programme since the 2020-2021 Spring Semester by the Centre of Professional Development and Life-Long Learning of the University of Thessaly, in Greece. It is divided into 10 modules which are provided over the course of four months. The structure of the programme is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of the programme

Module	Title	Duration
1	Introducing the program and exploring teacher needs	1 week
2	Multilingualism: languages and cultures in contact; Translanguaging	2 weeks
3	Kindergarten as a learning context; The National Curriculum	2 weeks
4	Early Years language development	1 week
5	Approaches, methods, and techniques in multilingual education	1 week
6	Creative activities, the Arts-Based Approach, and the Experiential approach	2 weeks
7	Collaboration and co-teaching: workshops and reflection	2 weeks
8	Developing activities and scenarios	2 weeks
9	Materials design	
10	Participant presentations and program evaluation	1 week

Participation fluctuated per cohort, from about 10 to about 35 participants, including in- and pre -service teachers, both English language specialists (amounting to about 60%) and preschool teachers (40%).

Participation in the programme involved online learning methods, with synchronous and asynchronous learning formats. Some of the activities used include studying theoretical content supported with examples of good practices, engaging with video material, participating in forum discussions, and doing individual and collaborative activities with appropriate tutorial support. In addition, three meetings each semester are held for feedback, support, and problem-solving. These also provide opportunities for presentations and webinars held by invited speakers who have specialist expertise. To complete the programme, participants are required to regularly participate in the learning activities (forum discussions, quizzes, and short tasks) and to submit an individually written and collaborative assignment with a practical focus, such as preparing activities, planning lessons, and discussing their theoretical underpinning.

The delivery modes and learning activities of the programme were designed to provide experiential exposure to its content. For example, an inclusive position towards languages is promoted by presenting participants with content in both Modern Greek and English, such as articles in both languages, bilingual presentations with slides in one language and content in the other, etc. Similarly, in forum discussions and class interactions, participants were encouraged to make meaning multilingually, often using 'English as a bridge' to communicate their thoughts and experiences. Even though most participants were sufficiently competent in academic English, and they could reasonably be expected to effectively participate in a monolingual course, this stance is intended to counterbalance epistemic injustices typically associated with English Medium Instruction (Bhatt et al., 2022) and most importantly signal a stance towards linguistic inclusion.

Throughout the programme, participants were expected to work collaboratively, typically in pairs with different disciplinary backgrounds and/or professional experience, e.g., language teachers would be paired with early childhood educators, experienced teachers would be paired with newly qualified ones, and so on. Such collaborations were explicitly and strongly encouraged in the tasks: for example, the structured lesson plans with which participants were provided contained separate fields where each specialist's actions were separately described. Wherever possible, the expectation for collaboration was built into the design of the tasks, and reflection was encouraged. The following forum discussion activity provides one example of such collaboration:

Activity example

We would now like you to reflect on [an activity] that you designed with your colleague. Use the forum to write about your experiences. Here are some prompts to help you:

1. *What actions did you do?*
2. *How did this make your colleague feel and what did they think?*
3. *What aspects of your planning does your colleague think worked best? Do you (sing.) agree? What would you (pl.) like to do differently?*
4. *Thinking of the parts that worked, what made them successful? Why do you believe*

that some elements did not work as you wanted?

5. *What is the most important thing that you both agree you learned from this experience?*
6. *What advice would you give your colleague for similar challenges in the future?*

The following extract comes from a post by an English language teacher in the forum discussion (bold for emphasis is ours).

Extract 1

As part of this seminar, we were asked to collaboratively design a 5-minute activity to introduce the English Language in Kindergarten. It was a very positive and creative experience for me. What was more interesting for me was ***the awareness of the many things I do not know*** *about the importance of early childhood education. I know my own scientific field but that wasn't enough. Thus, my collaboration with a co-trainee Kindergarten teacher began.[...].We decided on the topic and started planning the activity by adapting our ideas to the context of preschool education and foreign language "teaching".* ***This interaction between us and the mutual complementation*** *of the required knowledge was among those elements that I consider successful. This experience made me understand that absolute knowledge does not exist but it is supplemented to create a puzzle. Regarding this collaboration, I realized that only* ***with equal collaboration*** *can preschool and English language teachers achieve a lot.*

By encouraging collaborative work and reflection on it, it is seen that participants could acquire direct experience and co-construct knowledge in meaningful ways. Many of the activities were designed to raise the participants' awareness of linguistic diversity in their classes, which often yielded unexpected insights.

For example, when asked to research and describe the language profiles of their students, participants noticed that in addition to the obvious cases of linguistic diversity (e.g., recent newcomers who could not speak Modern Greek), many students (e.g. second-generation migrants) had rich, yet invisible, linguistic repertoires which included heritage languages and local varieties that are often excluded from education. The complexity of the students' repertoires was frequently underscored, as is shown in the following (translated) extract from a forum comment, where a participant described an (older) student with whom she had worked:

Extract 2

[student's name] was born in Greece, to a Greek father whose L1 was English, a Polish mother and he lived in the same house with his English grandmother and his Greek grandfather. He could use all three languages fluently in oral communication, depending on the person to whom he was talking. He had great difficulty with written Greek, although he was much better in English, perhaps because he spent a lot of time with his grandmother who helped him read and write. He would speak Greek with his classmates, but he often code-switched when quarreling with one or the other.

Such activities and the discussions helped many of the participants to realize how linguistic competencies interacted with identity and social forces, and to raise their awareness of the ways in which their teaching actions could positively or negatively impact the development of their learners' repertoires. At the same time, the limitations of the monolingual modes of

ELL were generally problematized, and participants explored various alternatives to them.

Below is a teacher's reflection posted in a forum discussion about their feedback after being introduced to pluralistic and multilingual approaches in the content material.

Extract 3

[...] the first thing I would like to try in class is the 'welcome' activities at the beginning of the year. With such activities, I believe that we can start to create a climate of safety where every child will feel part of the group and at the same time, everyone will be in a "position" (if we can say it like that) to learn from each other. It is very important because we want to use the ***linguistic diversity that each child brings from their family as a basis for them to get to know the English language,*** *which even if they do not have any formal contact with it until then, it is "abundantly" present in their daily lives. I also found it very interesting to create* ***bilingual stories and books*** *which I believe would put an end to many* ***taboos about the parallel use of two languages.*** *However, something I had never heard before and excited me and I would like to try is* ***the creation of language portraits*** *even in a more simplified form for Kindergarten as a form of self-presentation and a good opportunity to introduce each other to the class in an innovative way. At these young ages, the holistic approach to learning a language is very important and not the* ***traditional "dull" learning of words and phrases as such[...]***

This reflection highlights the participant's growing awareness of the importance of using students' entire linguistic repertoires in introducing English to the preschool and his openness to experiment with pluralistic, plurilingual practices in class. The following extract comes from a teacher's essay on designing creative, plurilingual activities in a thematically organized scenario, which in this case is about animals. She responds to one of the task's questions about how to make the most of the linguistic capital of all children, as follows:

Extract 4

We can "make use" of the children themselves who will give names for pets in another language and this will give them the chance to feel confident, as well as to other children to become aware of the fact that there are other languages present in their classroom. We could make a poster with pictures of animals and their names in English and in the other languages that the children use. We give them time to speak in English when they feel comfortable. We ***do not discourage*** *the use of the other language.* ***However, we continue to use English.***

Signs of progressive awareness of highlighting other languages in class and ‘making space’ for them are evident from these extracts. Translanguaging in class is 'not discouraged' among learners but it is approached in a rather hesitant way by the teacher showing her first, rather small steps in developing awareness of its potential.

5. Evaluating the Course

Towards the end of the course, an evaluation survey was conducted based on an online questionnaire distributed to its participant teachers. The questionnaire included closed and open-ended questions about the participants’ overall evaluation, response and critical feedback of the course. As depicted in Figure 1, very high levels of satisfaction were shown in their responses.

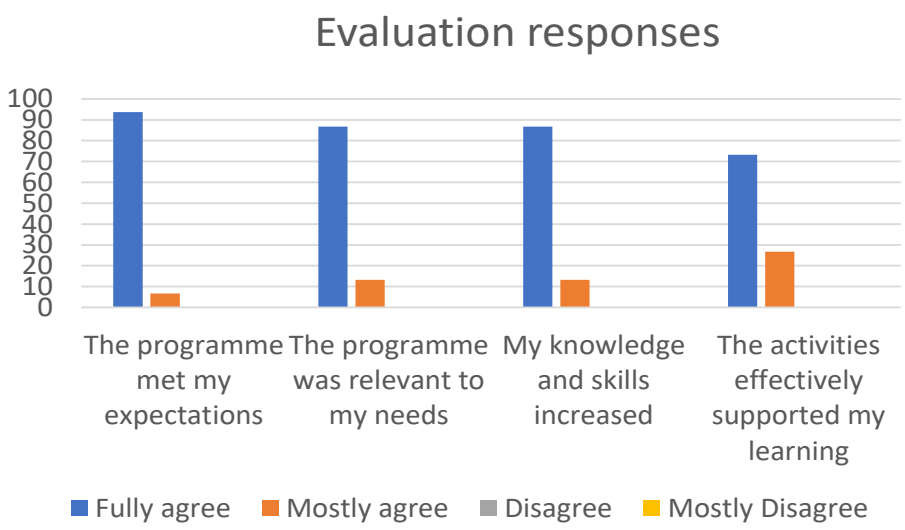

Figure 1. Participants' evaluation responses

Moving to the data from the qualitative analysis of the open-ended questions, the thematic categories that emerged were: a) enhanced awareness of approaching English in class through a multilingual and intercultural perspective, b) confidence in designing creative and experiential activities, well integrated into the curriculum through cooperation, c) readiness to design creative activities to promote multilingualism, and d) an increased willingness to engage in collaboration with another teacher in class. Below are some quotes from their answers:

"Collaboration with teachers of other subjects to jointly design activities and equitable and constructive cooperation in the programme. Approaching multilingualism and multiculturalism through creative ways that promote cooperation, coexistence and respect" (preschool teacher)

*"I feel more ready and confident to cooperate and introduce English and multilingualism into my class" (*preschool teacher)

"Three words about the programme: interesting, useful, inspirational. I am leaving with the feeling that I can really teach effectively in preschool education. I take with me knowledge, creative ideas and techniques" (English language teacher)

*"A great gain from the program is the '**communities of practice**' that we have formed. It can also be seen through our reflection how effectively knowledge is co-constructed, when it is based on relationships of equal communication and cooperation. (English language teacher)*

Common challenges that were mentioned by the participants were finding the time to meet the courses' requirements and completing its activities. Also, it was quite demanding for them to organize and deal with the collaborative work required as they had to overcome some communication difficulties and time restrictions.

6. Discussion & Conclusion

The teacher development programme is premised on the idea of contextually appropriate practice –that is, the idea that language education is most effectively shaped when it is responsive to the particularities of the local context. As such, it would be antithetical to the core beliefs that underpin it, to suggest that the structure and activities that were used would be readily transferrable to other settings. With this caveat in mind, we believe that certain broader take-away messages can be drawn regarding the *what*, *how*, and *why* of the ELL. The perspective that we have outlined in this article attempts to show that English Language Teaching does not have to be incompatible with openness toward linguistic diversity. Viewed as one among the many constituents of the students' complex and fluid linguistic repertoire, and enacted within a 'safe space' where normative linguistic patterns are suspended, English can help students to express plurilingual identities and develop multilingual awareness. English can be included in the classroom as one of the many languages composing the linguistic and cultural diversity present in school and social contexts, legitimizing their presence and use in class by being utilized as a bridge language to students' home languages and cultures, thus attempting to find ways of "reducing English to equality" *(*Seidlhofer, 2007, p. 149).

The implementation of the course also encountered challenges which could point to suggestions for room for improvement and put to discussion important issues concerning introducing English into preschool education. First, challenges involving collaboration and effective communication in a distance-learning course were faced by both participants and trainers. The need to develop long-term collaboration partnerships between ELT specialists and kindergarten teachers as well as the need for collaboration among different language teachers and class teachers in general has to be taken more seriously into consideration by educational policies and professional development programmes. Also, linking and continuing such plurilingual approaches in primary and secondary education remains a challenge, as it is difficult to maintain and develop continuity in educational practices from one level of education to another. It is also very important to follow up with teachers' future practices in the classroom to look into the link between the theory they constructed from the course and the actual teaching practice. However, the participants' openness to embrace linguistic diversity in class, challenging the hegemony of Greek and English in the Greek school was seen to have progressively developed throughout the program.

Language teaching and learning is a complex activity, and ELL even more so, in the sense that it is never random, yet neither fully predictable (Koustoulas, 2018), recognizing the futility of ascribing specific outcomes to specific antecedents (Stelma & Kostoulas, 2021). Contingent activity, which occurs when teachers unthinkingly reproduce in ELL existing ways of teaching at higher levels, is associated with stability. Normative activity, which is associated with a top-down flow of information and exercise of control, is associated with rigidity. Neither of these two patterns is suitable for generating the kinds of change and innovation that are needed to engage with the fluid dynamics of language classes, let alone challenge the unjust orders caused by neoliberal and monolingual ideologies in education. This can be done, however, by exploiting pluralistic approaches, translanguaging pedagogies and creativity, i.e., a mode of work that has a sense of direction and is free from normative

restrictions in every form. Creativity in lesson design, creative activities, and activities that bring learners into contact with linguistic and cultural diversity could all work together to create a "multilingual/multicultural nexus" (Ibrahim, 2020), a safe space where learners can experiment with novel ways of being and expressing themselves.

This leads us to the final reflection point prompted by the programme, namely the purpose of ELL. There is a lot of discourse on ELL, and more uncritically in ELT policy documents, which describes early language starts in terms of the increased proficiency that they will allegedly produce, and highlights the competitive advantages associated with high linguistic proficiency. Perhaps more insidiously, ELT seems to be used as a means for actively suppressing linguistic diversity, e.g., when English is presented as the only viable ELL option, or when blanket nationwide policies impose ELT on communities where the development of home and community languages could be argued to be a more pressing priority. In such cases, the 'invisible' bilingualism (Gkaintartzi et al., 2015) of emergent bilingual students is further invisibilized, by reinforcing the unjust linguistic hierarchies, in which official and international languages are valorized, whereas the students' existing linguistic capital is disregarded. The programme aims to challenge such views, by suggesting that alternative perspectives are possible, in which ELL is used as a means for raising awareness of diversity and for empowering learners to enact their rich identities.

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