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A sociological approach on teaching decontextualized language in Greek kindergarten: the Curriculum adaptations

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the official suggestions for the teaching of decontextualized language in Greek kindergarten. Oral language development is the foundation of learning to be literate, as well as, it is the primary tool for learning. More specifically this paper discusses the following main questions: a) which are the official presuppositions for pedagogic interaction for oral language development, and b) which are the teaching practices which are encouraged in current Greek kindergarten settings. A content analysis method was applied to the official Curriculum (Cross Thematic Curriculum Framework for Compulsory Education, 2003), which contains the official targets and the general framework of instruction for Greek preschool education. The results reveal that for the development of listening and speaking abilities a priority is given to structured activities. One of the main questions which is further discussed is the role of the kindergarten teacher. Even though it is clearly stated that the centre of any pedagogic practice is the child, the kindergarten teacher has to act as a mediator. Thus, kindergarten teachers have to establish a pedagogic climate in their class in which communicative events support the use of decontextualized language and thus empower literacy acquisition.

Keywords: decontextualized language, oral language, kindergarten, literacy, mediator

Introduction

Following the international trends in early literacy learning a new Curriculum for language learning in Greek kindergarten was firstly published in 1999 (Ministerial Decree C1/58, 1999) and later was incorporated in the "Cross Thematic Curriculum Framework for Compulsory Education" [hence CTCFCE] (Official Gazette issue B, nr 303/13-03-03 and issue B, nr 304/13-03-03). This curriculum adopts an emergent literacy perspective even though this term is not clearly mentioned in it (Tafa, 2008). More specifically, CTCFCE adopts the constructivistic approach to literacy (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982, Ferreiro, 1990) according to which literacy is learned by children in real social activities gradually, through a constructive procedure (Papadopoulou, 2009). It emphasizes print-rich classroom environment and children's active engagement in playful literacy activities through which children understand that we read and write in order to communicate with others and express our thoughts, ideas and emotions (Tafa, 2001). Since differentiated socio-cultural family positioning creates different contexts for learning the role of preschool seems to be extremely important. In the CTCFCE it is clearly mentioned that school failure, especially for those children who come from non privileged environments, is connected with "fail of acquaintance with aspects (originally: *εκφάνσεις*) of language which are related to written language" (CTCFCE, 2003: 587). The question which arises has to do with the exact meaning of this phrase, which remains unclarified, even though the understanding or not of this statement has dramatic consequences for pedagogic act in classrooms. Given the fact that there is no suggestion for explicit and systematic teaching of written code and spelling it is plausible to assume that these aspects have to do with the *written mode* (Halliday, 1985). As Halliday (1985) has shown, speech and writing are both forms of communication but they have a fundamentally different organization in structure, grammar, function and purpose. Written mode is distinguished by a great variety of vocabulary and sophisticated words, elaborated syntax (Bernstein, 1971) and decontextualized language (Snow, 1991; Cassel, 2004). Given the fact that decontextualized language is typical of narratives, explanations, definitions, arguments which are the main abilities which are aimed to be developed by Greek kindergarten pupils, it is plausible to assume that the Curriculum under consideration adopts the commonly accepted view that the use of



decontextualized language sets the foundation for literacy (e.g. Dickinson & McCabe, 1991; Curenton & Lucas, 2007). This view recognizes the importance of engagement in decontextualized talk and emphasizes the importance of oral language development to written language. If the above reasoning is correct oral language development is the cornerstone of teaching language in kindergarten. For that reason this papers focuses on the part of Curriculum for oral language development.

The analysis utilizes Bernstein's theory for pedagogic discourse. According to his views the pedagogic discourse expresses the dominant principles of a society. The last ones in case of Greece at the sunrise of 21st century are connected with a strong effort to Europeanization of Greek society and education through integration of Greece in the Euro Zone (Kassotakis, 2000; Koustourakis, 2007; Zambeta, 2002). As far as education is concerned the Cross Thematic Curriculum Framework and Curricula for Compulsory Education could be seen as an attempt to update Greek School and improve the classification of Greek school in international evaluations systems such as PISA (Alahiotis, 2002; Alahiotis & Karatzia-Stavlioti, 2006).

Pedagogic discourse incorporates power and social control principles. These principles are messages with clear sociological dispositions and such as they can be detected in official texts such curricula. The way these messages are connected for the school knowledge output determines the type as well as the patterns of the curricula. Moreover, in the curricula the official pedagogy, as a way for didactic administration of school knowledge is explained. Power relationships are analyzed through the use of classification and, secondly, relationships of social control are analyzed through framing. The term classification refers to segregations and boundaries among various categories, such as discourses, agencies and subjects. This classification could be distinct (strong classification) or not (weak classification). The term framing refers to the essence of pedagogic communicative interaction for didactic transmission of school knowledge in the micro level of school class. This interaction could be either centre on teacher (strong framing) or open to pupils' initiatives and active participation (weak framing) (Bernstein, 1990, 1996).

According to Bernstein *"pedagogic discourse is a principle... by which other discourses are appropriated and brought into a special relationship with each other, for the purpose of their selective transmission and acquisition"* (Bernstein, 1996: 46-47). Thus the discourses that consist the pedagogic discourse are: a) the instructional discourse, which refers to the transmission of various skills and b) the regulative discourse, which has to do with moral discourse and refers to transmission of values. The last one is a dominant discourse in the framework of pedagogic discourse and it affects instructional discourse mainly because it creates social order since *"regulative discourse produces the order in the instructional discourse"* (Bernstein, 1996: 48). In other words in the case of an applied curriculum, the way of didactic administration of any school knowledge depends on certain expectations and presuppositions for the roles of the teacher and of the pupil. Moreover, the realization of these certain roles is determined by teachers' own perceptions on identity of their role. We should have in mind that the teacher is the person who apposes the rules and determines, explicitly or not, the scene in which interactions and relations will be building upon.

As Morais, Neves & Fontinas (1999: 40) argue *"to analyze the sociological message underlying the modality of instructional practice transmitted by the syllabus means, therefore, to analyze the control which is given to the teacher (transmitter) and to the student (acquirer), at the level of the various discursive rules which regulates the transmission-acquisition of the pedagogic discourse"*. In this statement two extreme practices of theories of instruction could be distinguished, but in fact mixed theories of instruction are usually applied in kindergarten. More specifically, if in the official texts, such as those under examination in this paper, a didactic practice controlled absolutely by the teacher is suggested, it is plausible to assume that the message is that power and authority are on teacher. In this case reception learning is designated for the pupil. In contrary, discovery learning presupposed that control is on pupils rather than on teacher. In this case, the sociological message could be described as *"centered on the acquirer"* (Morais et. al., 1999, pp. 41-42).

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the model of theory of instruction as it is described in the official Greek curriculum for preschool education by focusing on the part which has to do with oral language development.



Methodology - Research Questions

The main questions are the following:

1. Which is the official way of pedagogic interaction for children's development of oral language?
2. Which teaching theory is designated in the official texts for children's development of oral language?

The source under scrutiny is the chapter of CTCFCE referred to oral language (listening and speaking). In this study the "Kindergarten Teachers' Guide Book" (Dafermou, Koulouri, & Mpasagianni, 2006), which would be considered as part of the official curriculum, was not included in this analysis. The main reason is that even though this Guide Book includes many valuable suggestions these are in a very disorderly and "messy" way, and in any case without correspondence to CTCFCE, as it would be plausible to be expected.

CTCFCE examined due to Content Analysis method. *Sentence* was regarded as the basic unit for analysis. The word "sentence" in this case is not synonymous to the grammatical term. It is referred to a complete semantically message (Weber, 1990).

Firstly, the text under consideration was read with sedulity. Three categories for further analysis were revealed. These categories depict the official perceptions for the "ideal" relation between teacher and pupil(s) for the development of oral language. These categories, ordered according to the dominance of teacher's role, are:

- F++: The sentences which were included in this category were those in which the role of teacher is the dominant and his/her power is mentioned explicitly. Words such as: narrates, informs, explains, conducts, attracts attention, describe this kind of relationship.
- F+: The sentences which were included in this category were those in which the role of teacher seems to be also dominant and his/her speech direct but pupils' inclusion is also required. Words such as: guides, helps pupils to discover, accompanies, provides, interferes in pupil's activity, describe this kind of relationship.
- F-: The sentences which were included in this category imply a kind of pupils' autonomy. More specifically it is obvious that specific individual characteristics have been taken into account. In these cases teacher's power is covered and the main target is pupils' active participation. Words such as: motivates, invites, suggests, encourages, takes into account individual characteristics or needs, show this kind of teacher – pupil relationship.

Pedagogic interaction for the development of oral language

In Table 1 the categorization of sentences under consideration is presented.

Table 1: Categorization of sentences

Oral communication (speech and listening)		
Abilities which are aimed To be developed	Indicative cross thematic activities	
to narrate / recount	[Children are given chances to recount their experiences taking into account the sequential order of events and to use words such as: firstly, later, after that, etc.] Children are encouraged to narrate a fairy – tale.	F+



	<p>Children are exhorted to connect stories they hear with their life and their own experiences.</p> <p>Children are instigated to compose stories with / or without any kind of guidance.</p>	<p>F+</p> <p>F+</p> <p>F+</p>
To describe	<p>Children are encouraged to observe and describe facts, objects and personal experiences</p> <p>(for example, they are encouraged to describe to other persons how they collect materials for collage and how they make it)</p>	<p>F+</p> <p>F+</p>
to explain and to construe	<p>Children are instigated to give explanations for their choices and preferences and to justify their views and acts.</p>	<p>F+</p>
to participate in conversations and to use basic argumentation	<p>Children are given chances to understand that in any conversation the participants are successively speakers and listeners and thus they speak in turn.</p> <p>Children are encouraged to develop a basic argumentation in order to justify their views and persuade their interlocutors.</p> <p>Children learn to hear their interlocutors, without interrupting them, and they learn to speak the relevant time having taken into account what has proceeded.</p>	<p>F+</p> <p>F-</p> <p>F+</p>
to improve and enrich their oral language	<p>Children are trained to use correctly words or phrases which are related to special circumstances, like wishes, greetings etc.</p> <p>Children are accustomed to learn by heart and recite poems, to learn counting-out games, riddles, tongue twisters, to recite small roles in the framework of performances in the class.</p> <p>Children are accustomed to produce correctly the initial and final phrase of fairy-tales, like "Once upon a time" and "and they lived happily ever after" etc.</p> <p>Children are trained to comprehend simple metaphors (to be able to discriminate the basic difference between literal and metaphorical phrases) by participating in word games.</p> <p>Children are trained to compose their speech, compounding simple sentences by using the appropriate compound words (and, for, but, because etc.)</p> <p>Children are encouraged to restate phrases or sentences, using words with relevant or opposite meaning.</p>	<p>F++</p> <p>F+</p> <p>F-</p> <p>F++</p> <p>F++</p> <p>F+</p>
to acquire phonological awareness	<p>Through songs, counting-out games and rhymes children are getting aware of phonemic aspect of language and they are getting able to discriminate the phonemes as elements of words.</p>	<p>F++</p>



The analysis revealed that a mixed theory of instruction is suggested. Even though kindergarten teacher is suggested to organize the pedagogic scene and climate, only in a few cases her/his role is the dominant one. It seems that the theory of instruction in Greek kindergarten could be described as “centered on the acquirer” (Morais et.al., 1999). In most cases children are stated to be in the center of activity. On the other hand kindergarten teacher doesn't seem to be just an equal partner. Her/His role has to be further analyzed and defined.

In 4 out of 17 sentences the role of teacher seems to be dominant. One of these sentences has to do with acquisition of phonemic awareness. Even though it is suggested that this will be attained through songs and rhymes the role of teacher is crucial and her/his guidance necessary. The other three sentences with strong framing are included in the part which has to do with the improvement of oral speech. It is indicative that in these three cases it is mentioned that “children are trained”. Moreover, these three sentences have to do with specific and decontextualized use of language: one with greetings and wishes for special occasions, the next for metaphorical use of language and the third with compounding sentences.

In the text under consideration there is a big number of sentences in which a strong framing is detected (F+). According to them it is teacher's responsibility to organize all those conditions which will help children to develop the abilities, which are considered as important for school success. Moreover, for many activities it is implied that kindergarten teacher has a dominant role not only in preparation and organization of activities but also during their implementation. It seems that without the leading figure of teacher the kindergarten could not follow the presuppositions of Curriculum.

Finally, there are only two sentences in which the role of teacher seems to be weak. The first one has to do with encouragement of argumentation and the second one with the awareness that fairy tales start and finish with stable phrases.

Kindergarten teacher as mediator

If the familiarization of children with the decontextualized register of school language (Dickinson & Sprague, 2001), as well as, vocabulary enrichment predict literacy success into school (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001), then it is not accurate to describe the role of kindergarten teacher as guide, leader, facilitator or even assistant. They are called to act as mediators (Baynham & Masing, 2000). Kindergarten teachers have to mediate the transformation of common-sense knowledge of children to school/scientific/ specific knowledge via particular linguistic aspects. By encouraging the participation of children to meaningful literacy events (Heath, 1982) they unpackage it for the learner and make visible the various processes that are invisible (Kucer, 2009). In order to fulfill the requirements of their role kindergarten teachers need a strong theoretical qualification, which, unfortunately, does not characterize the Greek situation.

Concluding remarks

It has been argued so far that oral language development in Greek kindergarten settings is facilitating through participation of children in communicative instances, which are mainly taking place in structured activities. As far as the role of kindergarten children is concerned, the analysis of our research material revealed that a mixed theory of instruction is suggested. It has been shown by the content analysis of the official Curriculum, especially of the chapter referring to listening and speaking development, that all the three categories regarding the dominance of the teacher's role (F++, F+, F-) are pointed out. Even though it is clearly stated that the centre of any pedagogic practice is the child the kindergarten teacher has to act as a mediator of literacy in order all the targets to be fully attained. Thus, kindergarten teachers have to establish a pedagogic climate in their class in which communicative events support the use of decontextualized language and thus empower literacy acquisition.



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