Asking the Right Questions in “New School” EFL Curriculum Design

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Abstract

The paper raises questions that focus on the ‘deep fundamentals’ of EFL curriculum designing, i.e., assumptions that tend to be taken for granted by policy makers involved in making decisions about Greek state-school English language curriculum designing, teaching, learning and assessment. I argue that such decisions should be informed by extensive research into the critical issues of modern-day English language usage inside and outside of the foreign language classroom; the broader foreign language literacy needs, wants and demands of the emerging learner anthropogeography of state school classrooms; stakeholders’ beliefs about the function of the textbook; an informed understanding of terms like ‘competence’, ‘fluency’ and ‘proficiency’; the integration of technology in the foreign languages classroom; teacher development.

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been much debate about how to bring the Greek state education system in line with 21st century realities, challenges and demands. The Greek Ministry of Education has announced numerous documents, policies and action plans on educational reform initiatives and curricular innovation, perhaps the most influential of all being the action plan entitled “New School”. In this paper, I explore two perspectives of this situation. On the one hand, I consider ways in which the current realities and concerns of a particular subject-matter can be brought to bear on the broader curricular policies put forward. On the other hand, I discuss how the principles and concerns laid out in such policy documents and laws can impact innovation in the pedagogical practices of that subject-matter.

The main centre of concern will be foreign language education and, in particular, teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), otherwise known at times as teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). In what

follows, I am interested in raising questions that refer to what I call the 'deep fundamentals' of the TEFL/TESOL practice and seeing the extent to which these are met in "New School" policy-making. The purpose is to arrive at a series of implications for English language teaching in Greek state schools.

2. Background

The debate about the modernisation of the Greek educational system reflects extensive discussions that have concerned scholars on a global scale for many years. For example, Gunther Kress, in a paper that touches upon the language curricula of the globalization era, vehemently argues for the need for curricula to be 'relevant and productive', in the sense that they delineate the teaching and learning of 'quite new kinds of dispositions, attitudes and skills' (Kress, 1996: 195). For Kress, the state educational system, in its central role as the determinant policy-maker, is responsible for incorporating parameters that respond to the social and political realities that define the global era, such as heteroglossia, hybridity, multilingualism and the plurality of semiotic forms. In essence, school students should be given access to modes of communication that will be essential for them in the future, in all aspects of their lives. This calls for a new type of literacy, one that empowers students to act relevantly in and through different language modes in a wide variety of continually changing social and geographical domains. Similar concerns have been raised time and again by scholars in disciplines as diverse as geography and history (Philippou, 2007), citizenship education (Keating *et al.*, 2009), and the information and communication technologies (Hartnell-Young & Vetere, 2011).

In the TEFL field, such concerns have been equally extensive in recent years, with the debate on curricular innovation referring to research in areas such as the role of English as an international lingua franca (e.g., Matsuda & Friedrich, 2011; McKay, 2003; Nunan, 2003), the building of digital literacies (Pegrum, 2009; Prensky, 2006; Warschauer, 2006, 2011), and the idea of global and European citizenship, (Byram, 2008; Huddleston & Kerr, 2006). All such concerns dismiss the view of foreign language literacy as a means of transmitting a narrow, singular standard language to passive recipients, in favour of one which exposes learners to and empowers them in becoming active users of a range of repertoires, genres and modes of communication, in line with the demands of the 'new communicative order' (Street 1999). The new globalization era demands that we abandon our old ways of EFL schooling and open up to the possibilities of a post-modern, post-EFL world (Sifakis & Fay, 2011).

In what follows, I will first briefly describe the basic principles of the "New School" action plan. I will then explore a series of what I consider to be key questions that should be considered for those principles to generate change

in Greek state school TESOL practices. In doing so, I will be briefly referring to different aspects of teaching, learning, assessment and teacher education. In the final section, I will outline some guiding principles for the design and implementation of a high quality curriculum.

2.1. The “New School” Action Plan for Greek State Compulsory Education

The “New School” action plan was introduced in 2009 by the Greek Ministry of Education.¹ It touches upon many aspects of teaching, learning and assessment and also draws and sets out a broad array of principles for pre- and in-service teacher education and training, curriculum design, implementation and evaluation, teacher evaluation, school evaluation and leadership. With regard to teaching and learning, the “New School” action plan (henceforth, “New School”) promotes the parameters of learner-centredness, digital literacy (there is particular reference to the use of technologies such as interactive whiteboards, e-books, and personal computers as a means of facilitating learning and incorporating more motivating and creative activities for all students), local, national, regional and global citizenship, and multicultural awareness and communication. According to the “New School”, teachers have the freedom to design and adapt materials that can help their students form lifelong learning skills, be responsible citizens, and participate actively in their social and cultural surroundings while exploring their potential as ‘small researchers’, ‘small scientists’, and as people who are able to communicate and express themselves in more than one foreign language.

The principles of the “New School” formed the basis for the development of the curricula for all subjects of compulsory state education. The aim of these curricula is to bring to realisation the “New School” principles by incorporating perspectives and practices that promote the pre-existing cross-curricular framework of teaching and learning while exploiting the needs and challenges of differentiated instruction. The new curricula were published in the summer of 2011 and are now (in the 2011-2012 school year) in the process of being piloted in a large number of schools, before they become fully implemented in all Greek state primary and junior secondary schools in September 2012.

For various reasons, the “New School” action plan makes clear the high priority it allocates to foreign language education, the most important being the

¹ The text of the law is available in Greek on the following website: http://www.minedu.gov.gr/?option=com_content&view=article&id=402&Itemid=785&lang=el (accessed: 19.10.2013).

importance of foreign language competence in all of the major parameters and the existing low status given to foreign language schooling in the state domain, especially at the junior high school level.

3. Key Questions

This section will explore ways in which the principles and parameters of the “New School” action plan can be linked with the realities and challenges of foreign language education, with particular reference to the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. My main concern here is to put forward a set of key questions that need to be answered, in my opinion, for EFL education to empower school students with regard to 21st century realities. These questions draw on Stern’s ‘basic building blocks of all language teaching’ (Stern, 1983, 1992). He identifies the building blocks simply as ‘language’, ‘learning’, ‘teaching, and ‘context’. My questions presuppose a comprehensive profiling of all stakeholders involved in the language teaching and learning process in a particular context, as well as an informed awareness of the ‘culture’ of EFL pedagogy. My aim here is to propose a critical orientation of where we stand today, in Greece, with reference to these building blocks (or fundamentals), and how foreign language education (in the form of curriculum design, teaching practice and learner response) can reflect the changing world around us.

The questions I would therefore like to pose are the following: What reasons do we have for teaching English? What English do courses and teachers teach? What English do learners learn? How do we teach English? What do we “feel” about English? The emphasis here is on elaborating on the questions in some detail in an attempt to raise awareness rather than provide answers. It is important to ask these questions, as they refer to concepts that are not always apparent or explicitly stated but are often implicit in acts of teaching or in central policy decision-making.

3.1. What Reasons Do We Have for Teaching English?

The question is about the need for the teaching of English in state schools. The term ‘need’ here takes several meanings, two of which I detail. It turns our attention to the primary need for using the language outside school, which then forms the basis of the argument for incorporating the teaching of that language as part of the state school curriculum. It is a truism that English is an important global lingua franca, i.e., the language most people around the world fall back on when they need to communicate with people with whom they do not share any other language. The extensive familiarity with English and its increasing choice as the default language of communication by people who are not its ‘native

speakers' has resulted in English constituting the 'primary foreign language' in most educational contexts around the world (Crystal, 2003).

Another way of looking at 'need' is by examining how the term is related to foreign language teaching pedagogy in Greece. English has been taught to Greek state schools consistently for more than sixty years, the very first curriculum ('analytical programme') for state high schools being published in 1953 (Σηφάκης, 2012: 300). Nevertheless, despite the fact that the communicative approach to language teaching was pioneered by D. A. Wilkins in his 1976 seminal paper on notional/functional syllabuses, and despite the communicative curricula that were published in Greece in the 1980s and espoused that approach, the teaching of English in Greek state schools could be described as far-removed from learners' communication needs. A much better description of the situation becomes apparent in the application of the acronym TENOR, coined by Abbot (1981), which stood for 'teaching English for no obvious reason' and was meant to characterise typical secondary-school learners as belonging in a situation where no obvious learning objective is envisaged.

According to Abbot, learners in TENOR situations are, in the main, school-based, where motivation levels are low or vague and learning needs are difficult to define. As far as curricular design is concerned, TENOR situations are broadly specified and the range of language skills at best balanced. It is for these reasons that TENOR curriculum design is typically described as conservative.

At the same time, the picture of English language teaching and courses in the private sector is starkly different. Private language schools in Greece offer courses tailored to satisfy students' needs that are linked to sitting for a particular high-stakes proficiency examination. This means that the curricula designed for those purposes are far more specific to individual goals, albeit goals that are almost always linked to a specific language proficiency level. At the same time, in the state school system, EFL teaching is viewed at best as offering an essential skill (to those students who are willing and ready to accept it) and at worst as teaching another subject-matter.

3.2. Predispositions Towards English

This question addresses schoolchildren's predisposition towards English and can shed light on the role of English in their lives and their reactions to the need for knowing and using it. By all accounts, Greek people are extremely positively inclined towards English. For example, a Eurobarometer study from 2001 showed that English was acknowledged as the most useful language after the mother tongue for 91% of respondents (Eurobarometer 2001). In the same research, 42% of people asked acceded to having 'sufficient knowledge' of English, with 24% believing that they are 'very good' users of the language.

At the same time, data from standardized proficiency examinations draw a rather different picture. For example, according to a report by Cambridge ESOL Exams from 2006, Greece ranked 50th (out of 67 countries), with 57% success rate, in the FCE (First Certificate in English) exams. According to the same report, in the CPE (Cambridge of Proficiency in English) exams Greece ranked 31st (out of 31 countries), with 46% success rate.

What the above studies show is that there exist obvious mismatches between what the broader perspective in Greece tends to be about, the knowledge and capability of usage of English and the corresponding efficiency with which the language is actually put to use. In other words, there is a mismatch between people's confidence in using English, which is high, and their competence in actually using it, which is rather low. There are various reasons for this, the discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice to say, one way of making sense of the confidence metric would be to refer to socio-cultural traits in L2 communication, whereas the competence metric could be interpreted with reference to the fact that most FCE and CPE exam sitters in Greece are far below the age recommended by the hosting examination body.

3.3. What English Do Courses and Teachers Teach?

The question focuses not only on the English delineated by the national curriculum but on the actual language that is taught in Greek state schools. It should be clear that the two are not mutually exclusive, as EFL teachers have access to courseware and additional material from the Internet that they are free to select, adapt and incorporate in their teaching should they be willing to do so.

It is possible to distinguish between four different options for deciding on the type of English that state school learners are exposed to. The first option, which I shall call the 'foreign language' option, corresponds to the teaching of a particular native speaker variety of English (typically, British or General American English) to be used as a foreign language by Greek speakers. In the literature, this is the typical view of English language teaching in Greece, that is, in as far as Greece and the Greek ELT paradigm is, in Kachru's (1985) terms, an Expanding Circle context of English language usage that is closely linked to the Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) paradigm. The second option, which I shall call the 'exam-oriented' case, describes the teaching of a particular native speaker variety that has an explicit and dominant orientation towards exam preparation (e.g., Cambridge ESOL exams). After all, it is well-documented that certification of C2 proficiency in EFL, in this country, is as important in finding a job as having basic computer skills (for a review, see Σηφάκης, 2012).

While these two options are familiar characterizations and depict an established reality for most Greek state-school EFL students and teachers,

I would like to suggest that there are two further options for deciding on the type of English that is taught: the 'international' and the 'multicultural' option. Both of these options are influenced by the widespread uses of the language in domains that do not necessarily involve native speakers and it could be argued that including them would allow for a more creative exploitation of the cultural anthropogeography of the Greek state-school classroom. According to the 'international' option, teaching mostly focuses on preparing learners for English-medium communication in international contexts, a communicational zone in which interactions between non-native speakers are increasingly dominant. This interactional pattern contrasts with the more familiar native - non-native speaker interactions of the foreign language paradigm (option 1 above). It describes English-medium communication between our Greek learners of English and other non-native speakers. This option, which can be linked to the Teaching English as an International Language (TEIL) paradigm (McKay, 2002, Seidlhofer *et al.*, 2006), corresponds to the international aspect potentially influencing English use by Greeks in general, but as operationalised by Greek learners of English in the foreign language classroom – for example, by means of tele-collaboration projects and other technology-mediated possibilities that increasingly enable pupils to use English internationally without even leaving their home town.

Finally, the 'multicultural' option corresponds to an interest in the functions of English, largely in interactions between non-native users of the language, in increasingly multicultural societies. It characterises the use of the linguistic and cultural resources available in the increasingly multicultural character of Greek society and in the ELT classroom more particularly. A teaching paradigm with this orientation has been termed Multicultural Awareness Through English (MATE, see Fay *et al.*, 2010).

Recent research involving state school ELT teachers in Greece (Sifakis & Fay, 2011) showed that, when asked which of the four descriptions best matches their current, or most recent, teaching situation, respondents showed a clear preference for the 'foreign language' option (47%). In fact, when combined with the testing variant of it (option 2), nearly two thirds of the surveyed teachers characterised their practice in terms of the traditional TEFL paradigm. This corresponds to the typical orientation of the Greek TESOL system as belonging to the Expanding Circle. What is more, the fact that only 16% of the respondents identified their teaching situation as an exam-preparation one means that, while the exam-preparation situation is popular in Greece, the state sector is not perceived to be part of it, as exam-preparation is largely believed to be catered for by private institutions. That said, the study noted that a fifth of the teachers were inclined towards the multicultural option and a sixth towards the international one. The conclusion from this small survey was that the multicultural and international options may be becoming a significant

possibility for TESOL practitioners in Greece but are not yet on a par with the traditional TEFL paradigm.

3.4. What English Do Learners Learn?

This question refers to the English that most state primary and junior high school children learn inside and outside their EFL classroom and the potential links and mismatches that exist. As already mentioned, in the foreign language classroom, learners are exposed to materials that are decided upon by the established curriculum and selected textbook(s) and can incorporate a wide array of additional resources. Outside of the foreign language (FL) classroom, however, learning opportunities abound and can come from domains that are closely related to information and communication technologies, such as social media (e.g., *Facebook*), gaming (online, offline) and mobile technology (e.g., *iPhone*, *iPod*, *iPad*, *PSP*, etc).

A growing body of research shows that such technologies are natural springboards for young learners and adolescents learning English as a foreign language (e.g., Adams & Brindley, 2007; Richardson, 2006). In fact, it is these technologies, whose mastery as instruments that empower communication between people have formed the backbone of what is now called digital literacy (e.g., Warschauer, 2006, 2011), that have prompted Kress's plea for 'relevant and productive' curricula. Digital literacy has been incorporated in the "New School" action plan. The question is, to what extent are the learning opportunities that exist and are practised by most schoolchildren in Greece today outside the foreign language classroom exploited by the English language teacher.

There are further implications of the understanding that young people's familiarity with English is increasing. As more and more non-native speakers of English use the language to express themselves and communicate with other non-native speakers, they essentially become owners of that language. This means that the 'native speaker model' (which, as we have seen in our discussion of the previous question, is prevalent in EFL teachers' minds) may no longer be that relevant because our learners have already bypassed it. This has important implications for the EFL classroom. As Suresh Canagarajah puts it:

We don't have to teach each and every variety of English in the world (or the standard Englishes of Inner Circle communities); we simply have to change our understanding of language learning. To begin with, we have hitherto taught English in terms of a 'target language'. The target has been defined in terms of a 'native' variety. [...] Now we should teach in terms of a repertoire of language competence. (Canagarajah, 2006: 209-10)

3.5. How Do We Teach English?

On many levels, the 'how' and the 'what' in language pedagogy are intertwined. Does English language teaching in Greek state schools aim at making learners aware of the fluidity of language and communication? Is the raising of learners' awareness of emergent and emerging means of communication and the rise of new linguistic forms (Kress, 1996: 195) a central part of the curriculum? The ways in which language is treated in the curriculum can vary according to beliefs held, policy concerns, overall orientation and aim (e.g., language testing). For example, it may be treated analytically or synthetically, as a set of grammatical constructions or discourse structures or sounds. Broader aspects of language use, such as appropriateness, may or may not be attended to, depending on the overall aims and learners' proficiency levels (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). These issues can be complicated further if we consider the fact that many textbooks interpret the general curriculum differently.

Another important side of the 'how' in language teaching is learner motivation. We have seen that knowing and using English is an important part of adolescent identity all over the world. In the majority of contexts, this results in English being not a 'distant' or 'foreign' language but one that young people can readily relate to. This has individual, societal and pedagogical consequences (Ehlich, 2009: 27). As long as different facets of this identity are allowed by the teacher to enter the foreign language classroom, language teaching and learning can be quite motivating. Research has shown that for language learning to work in school settings, teachers have to ensure the promotion of three essential ingredients with regard to learners (Deci & Ryan 1985, 1991): autonomy (which will satisfy learners' need to participate in decisions that affect them, having some control over what is taught and how); affiliation (learners' need to connect to and be accepted by other people in their peer groups); and competence (learners' need to feel they are good at certain activities that are important to them).

To that end, technology will certainly play a very significant role, as will learners' knowledge of other languages:

Previously learned languages can be acknowledged and used within the classroom context by students and teachers alike as bridge languages. The explicit acknowledgement of the existence of previous languages, plus recognition of their status as useful pedagogical tools will naturally ease the new language learning process. (Hufeisen & Jessner, 2009: 126)

If treated with attention to detail and respect to learners' idiosyncrasies, the Greek state curriculum for the English language can set the scene for the

'cultural authentication' of the ELT classroom (McKay & Bokhorst-Heng, 2008; Sifakis, 2005). It can empower teachers in allowing their learners to participate in a setting where they feel unthreatened by a dominant language (in virtually all cases, Greek), while, at the same time, expressing their own cultural identity. With the assistance of the appropriate integration of information and communication technologies, learners can engage in useful interactions with their peers using the 'neutral' vehicle of English (Fay *et al.*, 2010).

Such a perspective will have significant repercussions on learner assessment and testing. While the school curriculum aims at setting specific standards for gauging learners' progress, it is important for the teacher to also attend to individual learners' needs. The problem with standards is that, while they are (partially) learner-based, they tend to be holistic rather than individualistic (Kohn, 2000). It is crucial that state school assessment can distinguish between establishing and gauging *how well* learners are doing and *what* they are doing with the English language (cf. Broadfoot, 1996). Alfie Kohn (*ibid.*) has eloquently described this by drawing a distinction between viewing assessment as a 'doing to' process (one that involves a measurement of learners' behavior, actions and performance) and viewing it as a 'working with' process (in which case the primary focus is on establishing the reasons, motives and values that inform learners' behavior). The former is in many cases power-driven and imposes compliance, whereas the latter focuses on long-term goal setting and engenders a sense of cooperation between teachers and learners (Shohamy, 2001).

4. Implications for Teacher Education

What impact can reflecting on the above questions have on teacher education practices? The above discussion shows that probably the most important ingredient of successful English language teaching in the Greek state school is the empowerment of teachers to take responsibility for and have full control of their own teaching—essentially, to become autonomous teachers. To achieve autonomy, teachers need more than a basic training in ESOL pedagogy; they need to transform their own perceptions about their professional roles.

It has been shown that ESOL teachers' own perceptions of their professional roles can have a huge impact on the learning and achievement of their learners (Beijaard *et al.* 2000). Teachers' own images of their professional roles have been known to be largely determined by their training, their own practical experiences as learners and the local educational contexts (Ben-Peretz *et al.* 2003). In a similar way, EFL learners' engagement and motivation for participation in the foreign language classroom have been shown to be linked, among other things, to their teachers' own sense of professional responsibility (e.g., Abu-Rabia 2004; Lee 1998).

Both of these observations are confirmed by research with Greek ESOL state-school teachers (Sifakis & Sougari, 2007). On the one hand, it has been shown that, within the educational framework, teachers regard themselves as executing their duties by the mere teaching of the syllabus as prescribed by the higher authority, namely the ministry of Education. As they are not engaged in the curriculum design decision-making process, they are limited to viewing the instruction of English as if it were just another subject within the school curriculum. Their beliefs regarding their role in the teaching process are deeply rooted in the status that the teachers hold in the teaching domain and extend beyond any limitations that could be borne as a result of years of teaching experience, age or even professional qualifications. Another study (Sougari & Sifakis, 2010) found that more experienced teachers are more inclined to constrict their teaching to native speaker varieties only, with younger teachers being more open to explore and incorporate other English-speaking cultures in their teaching.

What these studies indicate is the need for teachers to be made aware of the importance of incorporating the world in which their learners live into their teaching. They also need to be provided with the instruments through which to achieve this. Current pre-service teacher education and in-service training practices need to come to terms with these concerns in order to overcome limiting assumptions and preconceptions about what constitutes successful English language teaching and learning in the state sector (in this regard, see Sifakis, 2009; Sifakis & Sougari, 2010; for a topical study of how tertiary education in the USA fails to develop students' capacity for critical thinking and complex reasoning, see Arum & Roksa, 2011).

The ultimate aim for autonomous teaching, according to Kumaravadivelu (2001: 540-544; 2003) incorporates the principles of particularity (the need for teachers to theorise appropriately their context), practicality (the acceptance of the primacy of situated teaching over abstract information as a source of context-specific knowledge) and possibility (the awareness that both language and pedagogy can either sustain or challenge existing power relations).

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have raised a series of questions in an attempt to challenge assumptions about state-school English language teaching policy-making. It is important that these questions are researched extensively to inform relevant decision-making and contribute towards a curriculum that responds to the 'new kinds of dispositions, attitudes and skills' of the globalization era (Kress, 1996: 195). The principles outlined in the "New School" action plan are a step in that direction.

Such a process involves a reflection on the 'basic building blocks' of language teaching (Stern, 1983, 1992). What is required is a concept of the nature of language ('what' is taught), a view of the learner ('who' is involved) and a comprehensive understanding of the nature of language learning (which corresponds to the 'how' of teaching). As far as the 'who' is concerned, it is important to know as much as possible about the learners involved in a specific teaching situation, rather than unquestionably adopt (and endorse) the profiling of their proficiency and learning strategies put forward by the broad curricular and course-book orientations. This will also lead us to collecting information about another dimension of language learning, namely, the reasons learners have for learning (or, to be more precise, for attending the classes)—the 'why'. These reasons will enlighten us on many levels and will significantly help clarify ways in which the syllabus can be taught more efficiently. Also, this process will raise issues that relate to other stakeholders that are sometimes ignored and not easily identified (e.g., parents or sponsoring institutions), whose views may also play an important role in teaching practice, if not the entire curriculum. Finding out about learners' interests and preferred learning strategies and styles will also help teachers work out what motivates them in their learning, which will further inform their own teaching practice.

These perspectives should inform all aspects of curriculum designing, namely, content (what students should know, be able to do, and be committed to), assessment (a measurement of what learners are doing at each time and how well they are doing) and context (how the education system is organized). They can be aligned to developing and delivering a high-quality curriculum.

Another important element that should not be underestimated is the role of course books in Greek state education. To the extent that they accurately interpret the curricular content and offer teachers opportunities for the development of learner-centred learning episodes, textbooks can be significant instruments within educational systems. However, if used unimaginatively, textbooks can be limiting and can dominate school teaching to the exclusion of other important materials (Chall *et al.*, 1991). This is especially important in ESOL education, where, as we have seen, the role of the language and the impact of technology and global communication have shifted substantially in later years.

As Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) caution, we must be wary of those traditional curricular elements that keep exerting an influence even within educational structures that have been reformed (also see Soysal, 2002). It is crucial that state ESOL education in Greece is placed on the alert so that limiting preconceptions that dominate teaching and assessing practices are eliminated and real progress can be made that corresponds to 21st century needs and challenges. It is with these needs and challenges in mind that the above questions have been raised.

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