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Research-driven task-based L2 learning for adult immigrants in times of humanitarian crisis: results from two nationwide projects in Greece

Abstract: This paper reports on two nationwide projects implemented in Greece aiming at providing courses in Greek as a second language for adult immigrants. A qualitative approach was adopted using interviews, focus groups, ethnographic observation, and written reports. Based on a prior stage of needs analysis, we designed specialized courses using the research stages as a means of empowering immigrants. We discuss our most important results concerning the needs analysis and the implementation of the task-based approach.

Résumé : L'article fait référence à deux projets de portée nationale menés en Grèce en vue de proposer des cours de grec langue seconde aux migrants adultes. L'approche qualitative retenue a reposé sur des entretiens, des groupes de discussion, une observation ethnographique et des rapports écrits. Après avoir analysé les besoins, nous avons élaboré des cours spécialisés utilisant les étapes de recherche pour faire participer les migrants. Nous examinons nos principaux résultats concernant l'analyse des besoins et la mise en œuvre d'une approche par les tâches.

1 Introduction: the projects' identity

This paper reports on two nationwide research projects (ELMEGO and MATH-EME) implemented by the Greek Language and Multilingualism Laboratory of the University of Thessaly, Greece, from 2010 to 2015. ELMEGO is an acronym

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for Greek for Immigrant Parents, a small-scale project funded by the Research Committee of the University of Thessaly. The subject of this project was to plan and implement specialized courses in Greek language for immigrant parents with children attending compulsory education. The main objective was to facilitate immigrant parents' communication with teachers and schools attended by their children. The second project, MATHEME, is an acronym for Greek Courses for Immigrants. The subject was the design and implementation of Greek courses for immigrant target-groups. These target-groups were immigrants from non-EU countries who are unemployed; mothers; immigrants with disabilities; and illiterate immigrants. The main objective was to empower immigrants during their integration process in Greece by giving voice to their narratives and designing specialized Greek courses. It was funded by the European Integration Fund (EIF).

The two projects had four main characteristics. First of all, they took place in a particularly sensitive context. Greece is going through a deep financial and social crisis. Immigration flows have been the pretext for negative and even racist reactions. Additionally, bureaucracy issues are an important factor of adversity in the implementation of projects. For both projects, priority was given to social cohesion and to raising awareness about the rights of immigrants. Third, an emphasis was placed on research during all stages of the project. We conducted needs analysis (Long 2005), which was perceived in a more societal way; we implemented teacher training through research activities; and we carried out multilateral course evaluation. Finally, we adopted task-based learning (Van den Branden 2006) as the most appropriate methodology for the linguistic integration of adult immigrants. There were seven stages in the implementation of the projects: 1) recording of the target-group; 2) review of the relevant international literature and tracing of good practices concerning the linguistic training of immigrants; 3) language and communication needs analysis; 4) specification of the course objectives and development of a specialized syllabus; 5) design, development and adjustment of teaching material in printed form and multimedia – organizing educational activities; 6) implementation of free courses: Greek language, history and culture; and 7) evaluation and assessment of implemented courses and creation of a resource pack.

2 Methodology

Concerning the research methodology, both projects were team-based and interdisciplinary. The research teams were composed of social anthropologists, sociolinguists, applied linguists, and specialists on education. We adopted a qualita-

tive approach, which involved open (unstructured) and semi-structured interviews, individual and group interviews, focus groups with prospective students and teachers, ethnographic observation of the courses, written reports (from teachers, mediators and researchers). As for the involvement of course participants in the research, 46 learners, five teachers and four mediators participated in the ELMEGO project, while 414 learners from non-EU countries, 28 teachers, and ten mediators participated in the MATHEME project. Our data analysis methods were qualitative thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis.

One of the most important modalities underpinning the interview design was approaching the interview as a tool to create deeper understanding of the experiences of others in all their complexity and multiple meanings (Mears 2009). The semi-structured interview was transformed into a critical instrument to understand immigrants' voices and the interview process was a stage towards the empowerment and integration of our immigrant participants (Androulakis et al. in press). Parts of interviews and focus group communication were held in three international languages. Specifically, Italian, English and French were used as auxiliary languages for communication with Albanian, Pakistani and Romanian immigrants respectively. We used mediation languages to conduct interviews. The working languages were Albanian, English, French, Greek, Italian, Urdu and Romanian.

3 Results

Our most important results relate to immigrants' communicative needs, which are connected with their everyday life and work. They expressed the importance of Greek language learning for finding a job and improving their economic condition (economic capital), as well as for their social integration and advancement of social capital. They stressed the need for effective formal communication with public services (objectified capital) and with their children's schools as public organizations. Their expectations from the language courses related mostly to knowledge and skills which they could not acquire from everyday language use. They identified the urgent role of acquiring writing skills and developing language competence in order to claim their rights in the professional domain, face up to their work obligations, and deal with bureaucratic issues concerning their legal status in the country, as shown in the following interview extract:

> Εγώ περιμένω να μάθω ελληνικά, γράφω καλύτερα, να διαβάζω γιατί να έχει αύριο πιο εύκολα για μένα, αύριο για μένα πιο εύκολα η ζωή, όταν μάθω καλύτερα, καλύτερα είναι η ζωή εδώ Ελλάδα, αν δεν μάθω τίποτα, τίποτα, δύσκολα, άμα πάω κάπου δουλειά μου

λέει φέρε αυτά, μπορεί να βρω δουλειά για ντελίβερι, πώς θα γράφω; πώς θα διαβάσω; Μου λέει πήγαινε αυτό το στενό, πώς θα ...; [...] Pakistani man, 13 years in Greece, 30 years old (interview language: Greek)

[I expect to learn Greek, write better, to read because to be more easily for me tomorrow, tomorrow for me more easily the life, when I have learnt more, better is the life here Greece, if I don't learn anything, anything, it is difficult, if I ask for a job somewhere they say bring me these, I may find a job as a delivery boy, how am I supposed to write? how to read? they tell me go to this street, how shall I ...?]

In addition, the immigrants' expressed needs were more relevant to processes and social skills than language itself (for example, how to search for a job in Greece or which documents are necessary to get an unemployment card, rather than how to use the language accurately in order to complete the document). The main domains which emerged from the analysis (school, home and family, movement/mobility, work, health, everyday communication) were explicitly or implicitly stated during the research process. The data revealed that immigrants lacked communicative language skills and intercultural understanding in the societal context, and were exposed to ethnocentric and xenophobic attitudes during the financial and socio-economic crisis. Based on these findings, we developed a multidimensional syllabus (analytic and not synthetic, process-based and not product-based, cultural, task-based). The task-based approach was chosen as the most appropriate since it refers to tasks which engage learners through communicative procedures in situations which require problem solving, decision making and negotiation of concepts (Van den Branden 2006).

The analysis of the teachers' written reports and the interview data revealed that the task-based approach was effective and resulted in team-building, identity investment and empowerment. It also gave opportunities for learners to share their experiences and feelings. They gradually became more involved in the teaching process and participated more actively. Drawing from their own voices: "No one wanted to talk about their school experiences but when the first one took the initiative, soon afterwards they all participated in the circle in order to show the corporal punishments that students suffer from in Nigeria" (Nigerian woman, 5 years in Greece, 29 years old, interview language: English).

In the final interview at the end of the courses, the learners stressed that the teaching materials and lessons were of interest to them and offered them opportunities for communication. Apart from developing their language confidence, they stated that they developed a more powerful will for learning in general, which would facilitate their integration process: "It is an investment in ourselves" (field notes). They particularly focused on their gains in language awareness and expressed their positive feelings towards the collaborative, supportive

and friendly learning environment. This is evident in their own words: "They helped us overcome the block. To express ourselves without reservations. I will join a regular school afterwards. I learned to express myself. They talk to us well, they helped us fill in documents. They taught us to do it ourselves, to express ourselves confidently without feeling ashamed" (researcher's written report).

4 Discussion

The focus of these two projects in Greece was the empowerment of immigrants in their integration process. Therefore, priority was given to learners' needs prior to the lessons and these were explored using a qualitative methodology. The scope of the research process was to empower the participants through all the research stages (design, modality, analysis) by giving them space and a "voice" to share their experiences and realities. This was an innovation in the Greek context. Another point is that researching language needs using insiders led to the emergence of a mediated trilingualism (Androulakis 2013). We also dealt with issues of asymmetrical power relations as part of the methodological design. Specifically, through the interviews we aimed at challenging the researcher's power in order to break down the researcher–participant hierarchy and build a connection (Bourdieu et al. 1999) through empathy and an insider perspective (Cooper 2009).

Aspects of immigrants' identities were integrated in the teaching material. As a result, learners were helped to invest their identities in the learning process. The student participants were encouraged to talk, to tell about themselves, to share their stories and their realities; they "carved a space of their own" (Scheurich 1997: 71) in each classroom. The impact of the projects on the researchers and the participants was evident, at a local and a national level. Finally, the projects were experienced as a process of mutual empowerment, raising the researchers' multilingual awareness. The projects' added value was their impact on the local communities, which we tried to affect towards the transformation of the national landscape in times of societal and economic crisis.

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