

Early Language Acquisition in Primary Schools: the case of Cyprus

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Abstract

This article presents the research carried out in the framework of a postgraduate dissertation titled “The teaching of the French language in primary schools in Cyprus” in order to evaluate the extent to which the European Union's goal to promote the learning of at least two foreign languages from an early age is being pursued to the Cypriot education system. Furthermore, this article examines the degree of necessity to take additional measures in order to achieve as far as possible a better alignment of the Cyprus education system with the European standards. In this article we will first refer to the benefits of language learning from an early age as well as to the changes made by the EU Member States in this field. The existing Cypriot language policy as outlined through the Cypriot education system is then described. Finally, the results of a conducted research are presented concerning the attitude of Cypriot citizens towards foreign language learning from an early age and additional measures are proposed to promote and strengthen multilingualism in Cyprus.

Keywords: foreign languages, early acquisition, multilingualism, promotion

1. Introduction

Linguistic and cultural diversity is a fundamental element of the European identity. To preserve and effectively develop this complex identity of the European Union, the role that multilingualism can play is extremely important as it is considered to be the most effective form of communication between people coming from different linguistic backgrounds. But to transform this diversity from communication barrier into a source of mutual enrichment and understanding a substantial educational effort is required. According to the European Union, this can be achieved through a better knowledge of European modern languages, making it possible to facilitate communication and interaction among Europeans of different mother tongues in order to promote European mobility, mutual understanding and co-operation, and overcome prejudices and discrimination. In addition, according to the European Union, when adopting or developing national policies in the field of modern language learning and teaching, member states can achieve greater convergence at European level through appropriate procedures for ongoing co-operation and co-ordination of policies (Council of Europe 2001: 2).

The European Union therefore plays an important role in shaping language policies since the issue of language teaching and learning has been on the agenda since its inception (see Resolution of the European Communities and Ministers of Education of 9 February 1976, Official Journal of the European Communities, 1976). The White Paper, issued by the EU Commission on Education and Training includes action proposals in specific fields, and consists a milestone in this area as the knowledge of three Community languages is set as a general objective (1995: 70). The learning of the

mother tongue plus two foreign languages in the context of the development of constructive diversity is being promoted ever since through various programs (Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci...), action plans, recommendations, treaties and decisions of the European Union (Beacco 2007: 34, Petitjean 2006).

In civil level and according to Eurobarometer 2012, 88% of Europeans consider knowledge of languages other than their mother tongue as very useful. 98% of Europeans believe that foreign languages are useful for the future of their children and 72% of Europeans agree that EU citizens should be able to speak more than one language other than their mother tongue while 44% of Europeans say they are able to understand at least one foreign language well enough to be able to watch the news on radio or television (European Commission 2012: 7-8).

2. Benefits of learning foreign languages from an early age

In March 2002, the European Council stresses the need to take further action to improve the basic skills of European citizens by teaching at least two foreign languages at a very young age (Barcelona European Council 2002). In its communication, the Committee of European Communities underlines that ensuring effective language learning in kindergarten and primary education is a priority for the Member States, as people's attitudes towards other languages and cultures are mainly shaped there, and this is where the foundations for learning other languages later are laid and calls on the Member States to make significant additional investments to achieve this goal (European Commission, Communication 2003: 8).

The advantages of language learning at an early age are not only limited to the awareness of personal cultural values and, by extension, to more open attitudes towards others, but also to the improvement of the linguistic competence of the speaker. The discovery of a different way to express events and emotions allows the speaker to distance himself from his mother tongue and consequently to develop meta-linguistic skills. Thus, sensitizing children to different communication systems operating under their own rules contributes to the cultivation of a meta-linguistic awareness that helps the child discover similarities and differences between the foreign language and its mother tongue, which can eventually lead to positive results not only to the learning of the foreign language but also to its mother tongue (Goullier 2001: 61, Bermejo 1993: 7). Consequently, the sooner the learning a foreign language begins, the easier and more profitable it can be. (Defays 2003: 136). This position is also supported at a neuropsychological level, as before the age of ten, the acquisition of two or three languages is not more difficult than the acquisition of a single foreign language (Groux 1996: 46). More specifically, the large plasticity of the young brain makes the child capable of acquiring new linguistic mechanisms and also capable of using the strategies it has already applied to learn its mother tongue or other languages by linking it to the new knowledge that needs to be acquired (Skutnabb-Kangas 2002: 18).

In addition, when learning a foreign language begins early, this results in prolonged learning time and has the potential to influence the personal development of the child at a very crucial stage (Edelenbos et al. 2006: 28). On the other hand, early language teaching also means that the change from one school year to the next becomes more and more important (Edelenbos et al. 2006: 28). This underlines the fact that the teaching and learning of a foreign language must be properly graduated from one school year to

the next, having as main points of view the individual potential of the pupils and their learning styles so as to attract and retain their interest.

But how are these positions reflected in the various European education systems and in the Cypriot education system in particular?

3. Changes at European level in the field of language learning

According to the statistics of the education network in Europe, Eurydice, there has been an increase over the last decade in the percentage of primary school pupils learning one or more foreign languages as it represented 67.3% in 2005 and in 2014 was 83.8%. This is mainly due to the reforms undertaken by some countries to reduce the age of compulsory language learning (European Commission 2017: 11, 62).

In most European countries, the age at which pupils start learning a foreign language ranges from 6 to 8 years old (European Commission 2017: 28). In Belgium (the German-speaking community), children attending preschool education begin to learn a foreign language from the age of three. The same happens in some Spanish autonomous communities and in Cyprus after the reform made in 2015 and fully implemented in 2017 (European Commission 2017: 29). On the other hand, in the United Kingdom (Wales and Northern Ireland), learning a foreign language is compulsory only at the age of 11, at the beginning of secondary education.

As far as the learning of a second foreign language is concerned, it becomes mandatory for all pupils attending schools in the Member States of the European Union for a certain period of their general education. In most cases, the age at which they start learning a second foreign language varies from 11 to 13 years. Luxembourg is the only country where all pupils are required to learn a second foreign language from the age of 7, followed by Greece, Switzerland, Iceland and Serbia where the learning of the second foreign language begins at the age of 10 years. In Cyprus, the introduction of the second foreign language into compulsory education takes place at the beginning of secondary education, at the age of 12 years. (European Commission 2017: 31)

From the above data we can conclude that linguistic diversity, which constitutes the wealth of the European construction, is directly related to the heterogeneity observed in terms of foreign language offer within the context of compulsory and / or optional education of European citizens.

4. Cypriot language policy

Looking more closely at the case of Cyprus, we observe that, according to the curriculum for pre-school education (Ministry of Education and Culture 2015), in the Cypriot education system pupils have the opportunity to get in touch with a first foreign language, English, from their preschool age where learning English is not introduced as a separate lesson but becomes part of the everyday life of children in school. The introduction of the foreign language can begin with periods of 10 minutes two to three times a week and gradually increase in periods of 20-30 minutes while there may be additional short-term contacts with the foreign language during the day through songs or games. Also, children's contact with the foreign language can be done through their everyday school life routines and through a variety of opportunities that can be offered during free activities.

This approach is known as CLIL (Content Language Integrated Learning) or EMILE (L'Enseignement d'une Matière par l'Intégration d'une Langue Étrangère), that is, the teaching of a subject such as Geography or Science or thematic units within different subjects through a foreign language. The CLIL approach is often also called dual-focused teaching. This means that there are two main target groups. One group is related to the acquisition of knowledge in the particular subject, thematic unit or epistemology field (such as physical education, music, etc.) and the other group relates to the acquisition and further improvement of aspects of a foreign language (such as vocabulary, aptitude to understand oral speech etc.) (Pavlou & Ioannou-Georgiou 2008: 645).

According to the official website of the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Cyprus for the New Timetable throughout their primary education and until the end of the first grade of high school students are obliged to continue learning the English language. From the first grade of elementary school, English language is introduced as a separate subject, and the levels of English language learning and teaching are ranked according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFL) (Table 1).

PRIMARY EDUCATION	
CLASS	ENGLISH-LEVEL
A'	A1.0
B'	A1.0
Γ'	A1.1+A1.2
Δ'	A1.1+ A1.2
E'	A1.2+A2
ΣΤ'	A1.2+A2

Table 1: Foreign language in primary education and level of conquest according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

In some elementary schools, the CLIL approach is applied to the subjects of Physical Education, Health Education, Science, Art and Design and Technology (Press and Information Office 2017: 1)

At the beginning of the compulsory secondary education in addition to English, pupils come into contact with a second foreign language, French, which is a compulsory subject until the first grade of the Lyceum. In addition, in the last two classes of their upper-secondary education, pupils have the opportunity to choose from a variety of other elective courses a foreign language: English (for directions where learning is not compulsory), French, German, Italian, Russian, Turkish (Tables 2, 3).

SECONDARY EDUCATION						
CLASS	LANGUAGE AND LEVEL					
	English		French		Other Foreign Language	
A' GYM	A2.1		A1.1			
B' GYM	A2.2		A1.2			
Γ' GYM	B1.1		A2.1			
	C¹	O	C	O	C	O
A' LYC	B1.2	B1.2	A2.2	-	-	-
B' LYC	B2.1	B2.1	-	B1.1	-	A1
Γ' LYC	B2.2	B2.2	-	B1.2	-	A2

Table 2: Foreign languages in secondary education and level of conquest according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

GRADES B' AND C' (LYCEUM)			
	DIRECTION	MANDATORY 4 Teaching Periods Weekly	SELECTED 4 Teaching Periods Weekly
1.	Classical And Humanity Studies		English or French or Other Foreign Language ²
2.	Foreign Languages	English	French + One Other Foreign Language
3.	Sciences-Life Sciences-Computing-Tecnology		English or French or Other Foreign Language
4.	Financial Studies		English or French or Other Foreign Language
5.	Trade And Services	English	French or Other Foreign Language
6.	Fine Arts		English or French or Other Foreign Language

Table 3: Offer of Foreign Languages in the 2nd and 3rd High School grade

In summary, pupils in Cyprus are obliged to learn English for 9 years and French for 4 years while they can complete their compulsory education without coming in contact with a third foreign language. Consequently, there is no possibility of acquiring two foreign languages to a satisfactory degree by all pupils, but only to those who will choose it. Furthermore, it is not possible to learn a second foreign language in the context of primary education, which prevents the harmonization of the Cyprus State with the recommendations of the European Union.

The question, of course, is whether the Cypriot citizens consider it important to learn other languages than their mother tongue.

¹ C = Compulsory subject for some directions. O = Optional subject for directions that are not mandatory. In grades B and C of the upper-secondary education compulsory subjects cannot be optional as well.

² Other Foreign Language: German, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Turkish

5. Research on the Attitude of Citizens of the Republic of Cyprus in terms of Language Learning

In order to investigate the attitude of the citizens of the Republic of Cyprus towards the learning of foreign languages, we have conducted a survey as a part of a postgraduate thesis in the Department of French and European Studies of the University of Cyprus. This survey had the form of questionnaires with a sample of 635 people coming from all the free cities of Cyprus. Six different questionnaires were submitted to six different population groups based on the criterion that the relationship of each group with the Cypriot education system differs and therefore their attitude towards the learning of foreign languages could also differ. Thus, these questionnaires contained both general questions and questions concerning each group individually.

In particular, 17% of the sample population was primary school teachers, 16% were fourth, fifth and sixth grade pupils, 16% were secondary school students, 16% were parents of children between 0 and 6 years old, 19% were parents of primary school pupils and 16% were parents of secondary school pupils. The survey lasted four weeks and the questionnaires were shared and completed in the following ways: face to face, telephone and e-mail. In addition, with the aim of completing as many questionnaires as possible, many individuals were also asked to share the questionnaires with their colleagues or with their relatives. Here it is to be mentioned that the people who participated in the survey were asked to remain anonymous in order to obtain as objective answers as possible. The questionnaires collected were then analyzed using the google forms application.

According to this survey, and as shown in Table 4, 83% of the teachers and 86% of all parents state that the Cypriot citizen must have at least two foreign languages. As far as English is concerned, 93% of teachers and 90% of all parents say that they have a very good knowledge of this language, while 22% and 16% respectively state that they also have a good or very good knowledge of the French language to that extent. Also, as far as German language is concerned, 3% of teachers and 7% of all parents state that they have a good or very good knowledge of this language. In addition, 10% of all teachers and 9% of all parents declare that they have a good or very good knowledge of another foreign language.

STATEMENT	PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS	PARENTS
	I agree	I agree
The Cypriot citizen must know at least two foreign languages.	83%	86%
Good to very good knowledge of English language	93%	90%
Good to very good knowledge of French language	22%	16%
Good to very good knowledge of German language	3%	7%
Good to very good knowledge of another foreign language	10%	9%

Table 4

As shown in Table 5, in the case of Cypriot students 55% of primary school students state that pupils should learn at least two foreign languages. The percentage of secondary school students compliant with this declaration is 76%. In addition, 99% of primary school pupils declare to attend private English courses, 20% private French lessons and 1% private Russian lessons. Also, 86% of secondary school students attend private English lessons, 22% private French lessons, 3% private Russian lessons and 1% private Italian lessons

STATEMENT	PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS	SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS
	I agree	I agree
Students must learn at least two foreign languages	55%	76%
I'm attending private English lessons	99%	86%
I'm attending private French lessons	20%	22%
I'm attending private Russian lessons	1%	3%
I'm attending private Italian lessons	0%	1%

Table 5

Regarding the attitude of the parents of the secondary school pupils and their children towards the learning of the French language and as outlined in the statements concerning these groups (Table 6) 54.9% of the parents state that the French language is useful for the pupil and 62.5% of students say that knowledge of the French language increases the student's success prospects. Also, 58.8% of parents of secondary school pupils say that the way of teaching French should change, while 59.3% of secondary school students say they agree with this statement. In addition, 21.6% of parents of

secondary school students say that the level of students in French is satisfactory. Finally, 56.7% of secondary school students say they like French, and 12.6% of these students say they have a contact with the French language through television programs, songs and games.

STATEMENT	PARENTS OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS	SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS
	I agree	I agree
The French language is useful for the student	54.9%	
Knowledge of the French language increases the student's success prospects		62.5%
The way of teaching French should change	58.8%	59.3%
The level of students in French is satisfactory	21.6%	
I like French		56.7%

Table 6

6. Conclusions

Through the above analysis, we can conclude that the European Union's goal of promoting the learning of at least two foreign languages from an early age does not seem to have been yet implemented in the existing Cypriot education system. Cypriot citizens, on the one hand, understand the importance of learning at least two foreign languages, since they state that the Cypriot citizen must know at least two foreign languages. On the other hand, multilingualism does not seem to be one of their priorities, since their knowledge of foreign languages is limited mainly to English and French, whose learning is compulsory in the context of public education. We recall that the majority of teachers and parents have reported that they have a good or very good knowledge of English, quite or very well, while a much smaller percentage states that it has a good or very good knowledge of another foreign language, usually French. The same is true for primary and secondary school students, most of whom declare to attend English private lessons while a much smaller percentage declares to attend private French lessons. A further study of the factors leading to this attitude of Cypriot citizens would be extremely useful in finding the right incentives and the appropriate means of promoting multilingualism through the education system and the state in general.

In addition, as far as the teaching of the French language is concerned in the context of compulsory secondary education, we could conclude that both parents of secondary school students and secondary school students understand the usefulness of this language. Nevertheless, both groups believe that the way in which students are taught French in secondary education has to change and the percentage of parents of secondary school pupils who is satisfied with the level of pupils in French is quite low. It would therefore be useful to consider in depth the possibility of reforming the existing

language policy with a view to implement more effective teaching methods and increasing the opportunities that pupils could have to learn French in the context of compulsory education. Finally, although the attitudes of secondary school students towards French language are positive, the majority of these students have no contact with the French language outside the framework of French as a school course, which underlines the need to further enhance the opportunities for promoting the French language not only within the educational system but also by the state in general.

At an education system level, possible measures to promote and strengthen multilingualism in Cyprus could be to further promote foreign language learning, particularly from an early age. A prerequisite for achieving this goal is, of course, the cultivation of intercultural education that promotes acceptance and respect for diversity by helping the student to recognize his own cultural identity through comparison with other people. Making use of the European linguistic diversity that the Cypriot citizen is part of can also contribute to the overthrow of stereotypes and prejudices towards individuals and cultures and can help eliminate any form of ethnocentric treatment.

Also, learning a second foreign language in the context of primary education would help the learner develop his / her linguistic repertoire, metalanguage skills and relationships with others, providing him / her with important skills and qualifications so that he / she can cope with a modern, demanding and multicultural society. To achieve this, significant changes are needed at the education system level, such as the provision of more foreign languages in the context of compulsory public education, the further training of teachers specifically for the teaching of languages to very young children, the reduction of the number of pupils in school classes so that language learning is effective and ensure the provision of properly designed and graded teaching material. These changes should under no circumstances be regarded as secondary and constitute the basis on which language teaching and learning must be supported at an early age.

In addition, the implementation of innovative and scientifically-based methods of accelerating foreign language learning such as CLIL and CALL would give new impetus to this area. It is now established that these teaching methods enhance pupils' positive attitudes towards foreign languages, as the need arises for students to use words, terms and structures in the target language that enable them to understand, shape and communicate content. Thus, foreign language is acquired, in part unconsciously, in a similar way to natural acquisition of the language and partly consciously and in a targeted manner (Scott & Beadle 2014: 29).

At the same time, the adoption of a language-friendly education policy should be reflected not only within the educational system but also through the actions of various actors. The state should seek a more targeted public awareness of the advantages of learning foreign languages and enhance the opportunities citizens have to make contact with other languages and cultures, thus increasing the motivation of citizens to learn more foreign languages.

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