



Research Papers in Language Teaching and Learning

Vol. 4, No. 1, February 2013, 99-119

ISSN: 1792-1244

Available online at <http://rpltl.eap.gr>

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## Introducing a foreign language at primary level: Benefits or lost opportunities? The case of Greece

### Η εισαγωγή της ξένης γλώσσας στην Πρωτοβάθμια Εκπαίδευση: Οφέλη ή χαμένες ευκαιρίες; Η περίπτωση της Ελλάδας

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*English language was introduced as a compulsory subject of the Greek state school curriculum in the last three grades of primary education in 1987. In 2003 English was extended to the last four grades while at present, pilot programmes introduce English at the first grade of primary school in 800 state schools around the country. A thriving private sector of foreign language institutes in Greece also provides intensive foreign language tuition and targets learners from very early age. Although Greek children's early start with foreign languages may be considered an advantage, this seems to be lost in their transition to secondary school. Learners in their first grade of secondary education are taught what they have already learned and are required to repeat work covered in previous years; therefore, issues of problematic transition and discontinuity emerge. As a result, they often lose interest in English classes within the state school and feel the need to continue to attend private language classes outside the curriculum. This paper aims to investigate (a) teachers' views with respect to problems related to the lack of continuity and progression in foreign language education between the primary and secondary sector in Greece, and (b) their suggestions for teaching and learning which take into consideration the idiosyncrasies of the Greek educational context so that learners' transition from primary to secondary education will correspond to the development of their language level.*

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Το 1987 η διδασκαλία της αγγλικής γλώσσας γίνεται υποχρεωτική στις τρεις τελευταίες τάξεις της πρωτοβάθμιας εκπαίδευσης στο ελληνικό δημόσιο σχολείο. Το 2003 η διδασκαλία της αγγλικής ξεκινά από την τρίτη δημοτικού και από το σχολικό έτος 2010-2011 αρχίζει η πιλοτική εφαρμογή προγράμματος διδασκαλίας της αγγλικής από την πρώτη τάξη του δημοτικού σχολείου σε 800 δημόσια σχολεία της χώρας. Παράλληλα, στην Ελλάδα είναι ιδιαίτερα διαδεδομένη η επιπρόσθετη παρακολούθηση μαθημάτων στην αγγλική από μαθητές πολύ νεαρής ηλικίας σε ιδιωτικά φροντιστήρια ξένων γλωσσών. Αν και η εισαγωγή της αγγλικής γλώσσας στην πρώιμη παιδική ηλικία μπορεί να θεωρηθεί πλεονέκτημα, αυτό

φαίνεται να χάνεται κατά τη μετάβασή των μαθητών στη δευτεροβάθμια εκπαίδευση. Ένα σημαντικό μέρος της διδακτέας ύλης της πρώτης γυμνασίου αποτελεί επανάληψη της ύλης της έκτης δημοτικού. Αυτό καθιστά προβληματική τη μετάβαση από την πρωτοβάθμια στη δευτεροβάθμια εκπαίδευση αφού αυτή δεν συνοδεύεται από αντίστοιχη πρόοδο στο επίπεδο της αγγλικής γλώσσας. Οι μαθητές, συνεπώς, συχνά χάνουν το ενδιαφέρον τους στο μάθημα της αγγλικής γλώσσας και επιλέγουν να συνεχίσουν την παρακολούθηση μαθημάτων εκτός του σχολικού προγράμματος. Η παρούσα εργασία στοχεύει στη διερεύνηση των απόψεων των εκπαιδευτικών όσον αφορά (α) τα προβλήματα που σχετίζονται με την έλλειψη συνέχειας και προόδου στη διδασκαλία της αγγλικής γλώσσας από την πρωτοβάθμια στη δευτεροβάθμια εκπαίδευση και (β) τις προτάσεις τους για τη διδασκαλία και την εκμάθηση της αγγλικής γλώσσας με γνώμονα τις ιδιαιτερότητες του ελληνικού εκπαιδευτικού πλαισίου ώστε η μετάβαση από την πρωτοβάθμια στη δευτεροβάθμια εκπαίδευση να συνοδεύεται από αντίστοιχη ανάπτυξη του γλωσσικού επιπέδου των μαθητών.

**Key words:** transition; (dis)continuity; mixed abilities, early foreign language learning; young learners; Greece

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## 1. Introduction

During the last 30 years Europe has witnessed significant changes in the field of foreign language education. The need to promote literacy in foreign languages in Europe was strongly felt as the European Union expanded and an increasing number of European citizens started travelling and working outside the borders of their country. According to Hunt et al. (2008, p. 915), this commitment to language learning may be attributed to the European Parliament's resolution recommending measures to promote linguistic diversity and language learning. Within this context, plurilingualism became a major issue on the agenda of most European countries and, to this end, compulsory education in at least one foreign language was introduced in the early stages of state primary school.

With respect to the language of instruction, English is by far the most widely taught language in all European countries in both primary and secondary education. On the whole, more than 90% of all students in Europe choose to study English in secondary education (Eurydice, 2008). This means that most European learners study English as a foreign language at school for a substantial number of years, usually between the ages of 8 and 16.

Since 1984, there has been a tendency in Europe towards a continuous increase in the number of years of foreign language instruction; in some countries, instruction of a foreign language is a compulsory subject even from the first grade of primary education (Belgium, Spain, Italy, Malta, Austria, Norway, Luxemburg as found in Eurydice, 2008). Such decisions also demonstrate the willingness of educational planners to take advantage of young children's greater plasticity and ability to acquire knowledge and automatise new skills. According to the critical period hypothesis, the optimum period for language acquisition is the years before puberty; after that time the ability to learn a language naturally atrophies (Lenneberg, 1967). Younger learners have a more intuitive grasp of L2 structures, are more attuned to the L2 phonological system (Johnstone, 2001 cited in Bialystok & Hakuta, 1999), and their auditory processing is better (ibid). Early foreign language learning has also been shown to provide learners with a positive attitude towards the target language and cultural

diversity (cf. Hunt et al. 2005). Their social skills develop and they are confident and enthusiastic, with a natural curiosity for everything (cf. Tierney & Gallastegi, 2005) (For a comprehensive review of language-related research in L2 acquisition see Muñoz & Singleton, 2011). Thus, the assumption is that learners who start learning a foreign language in the primary and continue into secondary school will most probably have an advantage over those with no previous exposure to the language (Hill et al., 1998).

The expansion of foreign language teaching in primary education, of course, does not in itself guarantee success in language learning (cf. Martin, 2000). Research projects in Barcelona (Muñoz, 2006) and Hungary (Nikolov, 2009) cast doubt on the idea of taking young learners' success in language learning for granted. What these researchers observe is that no matter what the onset age of learning is, linguistic stimuli and systematic exposure to the language are indispensable for children's language and cognitive development. This implies that the introduction of early L2 instruction in formal settings will not benefit young learners unless it follows a well-structured programme which ensures systematic exposure to the L2, continuous instruction, continuity in syllabus and smooth transition from the primary to the secondary level of education (cf. Marinova-Todd, Marshall & Snow, 2000; Mitchell, Martin & Grenfell, 1992). In fact, policy decisions adopted by most European countries to expand foreign language learning at the primary level seem to have an important impact on foreign language learning at the secondary level. Part of the foreign language syllabus previously covered in secondary education has now been moved to primary school level.

With respect to the Greek educational system, Greece aligned itself with the European recommendations and decided on the expansion of foreign language education to the primary sector. What makes this decision a challenging one, is its implementation and the related issues of transition and continuity of input. As English was initially introduced in Greece as a foreign language at secondary schools, consequent decisions had to be made with respect to the expansion and continuity of the syllabus, the coursebooks and other teaching materials to be used in the two educational sectors, and foreign language teachers' training in the respective sectors. It would be reasonable to assume that the syllabus and resources would be modified following this change in policy; in fact, both have remained unchanged since 1997. As a result, the issue of liaison between primary and secondary sector in foreign language learning needs to be addressed in order to ensure a smooth transition between the two educational sectors.

Therefore, this paper aims to explore the issue of progression and continuity with reference to foreign language education in Greece, and it will:

- describe the characteristics of the Greek EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context as well as the current situation regarding foreign language education in both the primary and secondary sector;
- explore the problems related to the lack of continuity and progression in foreign language education between the primary and secondary sector in Greece, and
- suggest strategies for bridging the gap between primary and secondary level in foreign language teaching. Such strategies will recognize the idiosyncrasies of the Greek educational context and aim to capitalize on the benefits of the early start by providing differentiation in the secondary sector.

## 2. The Greek EFL educational context

Greeks' interest in learning foreign languages is reflected in the Greek educational system, which provides comprehensive foreign language tuition in both the state and private sectors. Foreign language tuition was initially introduced into the secondary school curriculum in 1836 with French as a foreign language being taught 4 hours weekly (Dimaras, 1983); in 1987 this was extended to the last three grades of a few primary schools. In 1991, there was a change in the primary school curriculum and English became the compulsory foreign language in all schools. More recently, in 2003, English was extended to the last four grades of primary education and in 2010 foreign language instruction was introduced in the first grade in a selected number of schools. This is the piloting stage of a new language plan which aims to introduce English language instruction to very young learners. The syllabus for English as a foreign language, and the coursebooks state schools use, are approved by the Pedagogical Institute. This is a state educational institute which belongs to the Ministry of Education, Life Long Learning and Religious Affairs. The Pedagogical Institute aims primarily to provide advice with respect to educational policies and innovations. It is responsible for scientific research, the design and development of instructional materials, the design and implementation of teacher training seminars and various educational projects in Greece.

An intriguing characteristic of EFL education in Greece is that the vast majority of parents choose to intensify young learners' foreign language education and are willing to pay for private tuition alongside state school instruction. Thus, there is a thriving private sector of foreign language institutes which provide intensive foreign language tuition to students as young as 8 years old or even younger. The ultimate goal of this intensification of foreign language studies is to enable learners to obtain language certificates, as future career development is considered to be inextricably linked to certified knowledge of foreign languages. The introduction of foreign language instruction in the early state primary education was expected to limit or even replace private language tuition. Far from such expectations, however, the number of private language institutes in Greece more than tripled between the years 1985 and 2000 as private language tuition seems to have become the norm rather than the exception (Mattheoudakis & Alexiou, 2009). The data of the Ministry of Education show that currently there are more than 7,350 language schools in the country. The fact is that state schools provide fewer contact hours and less intensive courses than private language institutes; this may be one of the reasons why parents tend to believe that foreign languages are better learned at private language institutes. Tables 1 and 2 overlaid show a comprehensive breakdown of contact hours in state schools and private language institutes.

Due to several factors relating to students' tutorial schooling outside the state school system, (e.g., differences in the age of entry, differences in contact hours, lack of standardization in the services provided), to parents' socio-economic status (Mattheoudakis & Alexiou, 2009), but also to variability in the students' rate of learning, children's proficiency in English varies widely; thus, by the end of their primary school education, several of them may be holders of two or three language certificates (at A1, A2 or even B1 level, according to the Common European Framework of Reference) (Mattheoudakis & Nicolaidis, 2005). All the above factors, however, create difficulties when it comes to placement and assessment in secondary education.

<i>School year</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Contact hours</i>
3 <sup>rd</sup> primary	8	3
4 <sup>th</sup> primary	9	3
5 <sup>th</sup> primary	10	3
6 <sup>th</sup> primary	11	3
1 <sup>st</sup> junior high school	12	3
2 <sup>nd</sup> junior high school	13	2
3 <sup>rd</sup> junior high school	14	2
1 <sup>st</sup> senior high school	15	3
2 <sup>nd</sup> senior high school	16	2
3 <sup>rd</sup> senior high school	17	2

*Table 1. School grades during which English is taught in mainstream state schools, age of students and contact hours per week for each grade*

<i>Level</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Contact hours</i>
Junior	8	3
A elementary	9	3-4
B elementary	10	3-4
C senior	11	3-5
D senior	12	5-6
First Certificate of English	13	6
Proficiency 1	14	6-7
Proficiency 2	15	6-7

*Table 2. Levels of English taught in private language institutes, approximate age of students and contact hours per week for each level*

To be more specific, young learners at Greek state primary schools are expected to cover a series of three coursebooks (Sepirgioti et al 1998; Sepirgioti et al 1999; Sepirgioti et al 2006) over the last three grades of their primary education, respectively (grades 4, 5, and 6), while for the first year of English language instruction (grade 3 of primary school), teachers are allowed to choose a beginners' book for young learners from a state-approved list of commercially available coursebooks. Such materials and the syllabus aim to take learners up to the elementary level. In the secondary sector, English language teachers are provided with a long list of state-approved coursebooks – by both international and local publishers – and are required to choose a coursebook according to the linguistic and cognitive needs of their students. Teachers are expected to assess learners' foreign language competence upon entering secondary school; this is commonly done by means of a placement test specially designed by teachers themselves. On the basis of the test results, learners are streamed in two levels: elementary or intermediate. However, it has to be noted that the results are often misleading and unreliable as learners may choose to underperform in order to be placed at a lower level class and thus achieve higher grades. Moreover, learners' assessment does not take into consideration their previous language learning experience in private institutes; hence, the placement test is usually undemanding for the majority of the students.

Regarding English language teachers' qualifications in primary schools, they are all graduates of a university department of English Language and Literature; their degree actually entitles

them to teach in both the primary and secondary sector. This is different from what happens in other countries (cf. Bolster, Balandier-Brown & Rea-Dickins 2004) where generalist teachers are responsible for the teaching of foreign languages in the primary sector. Teachers of English in Greece are expected to be highly proficient in the language they teach and quite well versed in current teaching methodologies. However, university courses in methodology seem to place more emphasis on raising student teachers' awareness of different methods and approaches to language teaching rather than providing an educational background of pedagogical principles (e.g. pedagogical theories, frameworks and practices supported by Piaget, Vygotsky, Montessori, Bruner, Donaldson, Freire, etc.). Contrary to what might be expected, the introduction of English language teaching in primary education has had very little influence on the programme of studies of the relevant university departments; consequently, even today, the pedagogical education of English language teachers seems to be quite limited.

### **3. The transition from primary to secondary education**

The transition from primary to secondary education seems to be much more challenging in the Greek foreign language teaching context than in any other European country because of the extended foreign language teaching private sector in Greece (cf. Mattheoudakis & Alexiou, 2009). Even though the intensification of foreign language studies is mainly due to private tuition outside the school system, realistically one might expect that the state system would take it into consideration and build on it so as to help learners achieve their learning goals faster and earlier. However, whatever benefits young learners are supposed to gain in primary education, due to this early instruction scheme and parallel private tuition, are likely to be lost when they move on to secondary education.

Generally, language teachers in secondary schools are confronted with mixed-ability classes, and these may include highly proficient language learners but also immigrant students who have just moved to Greece and have never been exposed to English before. In view of this wide variety of foreign language learning experience, teachers often choose to ignore the relatively proficient or advanced learners and focus instead on the language needs of the weaker ones; language teachers are strongly encouraged by school advisers to adopt such teaching approaches. Consequently, learners in their first year of secondary education are taught what they have already learned and are often treated as absolute beginners (personal communication with foreign language teachers' advisers). As a result, they feel the need to continue attending private language classes so as to further develop their foreign language knowledge and skills. Due to all the above, language learning in state schools becomes a demotivating and frustrating experience for the vast majority of learners.

When learners move from primary to secondary school, they also experience important changes in methodology and teaching approaches. As primary learners, they are instructed mainly through games, songs, stories, rhymes and playful activities. Limited homework is assigned and learners are informally and alternatively assessed, for example through portfolios and projects. When in secondary school, teaching becomes more formal, assessment is systematic and quite demanding, grammar is taught explicitly, the pace of the lesson is faster, and there may be a huge amount of homework and rote learning activities assigned (cf. Boodhoo, 2005). As learning of a foreign language in the secondary school is 'serious business', interaction is very limited and all this may result in students feeling demotivated. It is obvious that teaching English in a Greek secondary school is a complex and challenging task for English language teachers: they are required to find effective ways

to teach their mixed-ability classes but also to sustain and further develop students' interest in attending their classes (cf. Cameron, 2003).

#### **4. Aims**

The aim of this paper is to investigate teachers' views concerning the transition of Greek learners from primary to secondary education. Their views are expected to shed light on the problem of discontinuity viewed in the Greek EFL context and several implications are expected to emerge and lead to useful recommendations. It has to be noted that teachers' views may not necessarily coincide with those of their students; yet, the instructors' opinions represent one perspective on current foreign language education in Greece.

Our assumptions were that (a) there is an unsuccessful transition from elementary to secondary school; (b) as a result, there is discontinuity in learning because of repetition; (c) due to this repetition, learners' motivation is lower in secondary school.

#### **5. Method**

##### ***Participants***

The research was carried out in 2008 and data was collected from 50 Greek state school teachers of English. All of them had worked in primary schools but were later appointed in the secondary sector; therefore, they had experience in both educational contexts and were able to form an opinion regarding the issue of transition from primary to secondary school as well as the teaching syllabi. At the time the study was conducted, the participants were teaching in various parts of the country. Most of the respondents – 46 – were female teachers. Their age ranged between 21 and 51 years (mean age: 29.6) and thus the length of teaching experience varied widely – between 1 and 27 years (mean length of experience: 7 years). Regarding their educational background, 35 teachers were holders of a B.A. degree in English Language and Literature and only 15 teachers had completed postgraduate studies, either in Greece or abroad.

##### ***Instruments***

The instrument used for the present study was a 34-item survey written in English which included 33 Likert-type statements and 1 open-ended question (see Appendix I). In designing and constructing the questionnaire, general suggestions proposed by Dörnyei (2003) were taken into consideration. To be more specific, the questionnaire included clear instructions and simple statements so as to facilitate and motivate the participants to complete it. In most cases, learners were required to circle the appropriate answer and in a few cases they needed to answer using minimal wording. The advantage of closed questions over open-ended ones is that they make the processing of the results a lot more manageable (Bell, 1993; Dörnyei, 2003).

The questionnaire was distributed via email or personal contact. It required only 5-10 minutes for its completion and yielded both quantitative and qualitative data. The Likert-type statements were classified into six thematic areas aiming to elicit information on practising teachers' views regarding (a) the syllabus of English language teaching in the primary and secondary sector, (b) learners' motivation, (c) the coursebooks used in both primary and secondary schools, (d) the issue of private language institutes, (e) the teaching

methods used in the foreign language classroom in both primary and secondary schools, and (f) the issue of learners' transition from primary to secondary school. Teachers had to indicate their answers by choosing one of the five possible answers: "strongly agree", "agree", "neither agree nor disagree", "disagree", "strongly disagree". The open-ended question required teachers to provide further insights on the issue of learners' transition.

## 6. Results

A total of 50 questionnaires were analyzed. Due to space limitations, only the main findings are presented and discussed in the present paper. Similarly, the results provided represent the answers chosen by the majority of teachers; the rest of the responses selected can be seen in Appendix I. The open-ended question simply required teachers to express their opinion, beliefs, or comments on any of the issues raised in the questionnaire. Their answers revealed concerns and worries about the state of foreign language education in Greece and their comments actually touch upon four interrelated issues:

- a) Greek learners' transition in English language classes from primary to secondary education
- b) repetition and lack of continuity in the English language syllabus
- c) learners' motivation in learning English within the state school system
- d) mixed-ability learners in English language classes

Along with the quantitative data, teachers' responses to the open-ended question will be presented and discussed.

### A. Syllabus

For the analysis of the quantitative results, frequencies were calculated and descriptive statistics were conducted. As already noted, there are five possible answers, among which teachers could choose: "strongly agree", "agree", "neither agree nor disagree", "disagree", "strongly disagree"; however, in the descriptive analysis of the results, we chose to report the percentages of the first two and the last two choices, respectively, together. We recognize that this way of presentation may be less accurate; however, it has been chosen because it allows us to have a clearer picture of teachers' views on the issues examined.

Initially, teachers were asked to indicate whether the syllabus of English language in the last grade of primary school is similar to that of the first grade of secondary school. A relative majority of teachers (46%) agreed that there are a lot of similarities in the syllabi of those two years while 26% disagreed. The second statement required teachers to reflect on the effectiveness of the transition in the syllabus between those two grades. The majority of them (56%) believe that this transition is unsuccessful and only 22% stated the opposite.

In response to the claim that there is no progress in the syllabus from the last grade of primary school to the first grade of secondary school, 58% of the respondents agreed that there is no actual progress; only 16% of the teachers thought that there is some progress in the syllabus. At the same time, however, 52% of the teachers disagreed with the following statement, viz. "The syllabus of the coursebook at the first grade of secondary school should follow that of the last grade in primary school" and this view seems to contradict their answer to the previous statements. This *prima facie* contradiction may be explained as follows: teachers know that the level of the coursebook used in the final grade of primary



school is much lower than most learners' level of proficiency; it is therefore possible that they do not consider it appropriate to follow it in secondary school. Finally, to the statement concerning continuity in the syllabus between primary and secondary school, 50% replied that there is a lack of continuity, while 26% disagreed.

The following comment may be indicative of teachers' feelings:

"I can only assume what they were taught. I base my assumptions on my students' current level of knowledge as well as on discussions we have about it. As long as children keep attending private language classes, it is impossible to know exactly what everybody has been taught. We can only observe the students' progress; we cannot be sure of the syllabus covered".

## **B. Learners**

The second group of statements aimed to elicit teachers' views regarding learners' motivation. In response to the suggestion that learners' motivation is higher when they enter secondary school, 42% of the teachers indicated that indeed it is higher while 32% of the respondents thought it was lower. With respect to the reason lying behind learners' low motivation, 48% of the respondents agreed that this is because they repeat material previously covered in primary school while 24% disagreed. Repetition of syllabus and of work previously covered is bound to lead to demotivated and uninterested language learners. As one teacher pointed out:

"There's low motivation at all levels of education from the moment students start attending private schools with the 'excuse' that no work is done at state schools. So there has to be a change in mentality".

Most of the teachers agreed that learners' mentality needs to change. One teacher interestingly said that:

"From my experience, learners' proficiency does not depend so much on the amount of English they were exposed to in primary school but rather on their general mentality and motivation. Stronger learners might indeed benefit from syllabus continuity between the sixth grade of primary school and the first grade of secondary school; for weaker students, repeating part of the material already taught in primary school is an opportunity to revise. The teacher's role is primarily to try and develop weaker learners' ability and language awareness as well as to provide interesting material for stronger learners so that they maintain their motivation".

The next statement aimed to elicit teachers' opinion on whether weaker learners actually benefit from the similarities in the syllabus at primary and secondary school. A high percentage of the respondents (56%) believe that learners do benefit from the repetition, 16% of the teachers disagreed while 28% of the respondents did not indicate agreement or disagreement. One teacher stated:

"Although the syllabus is similar in the final grade of primary school and the first grade of secondary school, weak pupils feel that they do completely different things, whereas high achievers are most of the times bored by repetition".

A large percentage of teachers (54%) indicated that stronger learners benefit from the richer linguistic input provided in secondary schools as compared to that in primary schools; only 20% of the respondents thought otherwise. Such a view may also explain teachers' response to the following statement which required them to state whether learners lose interest in learning English when they enter secondary school. More than half of the teachers (54%) indicated that their secondary school learners do not lose their motivation in learning English; this may be due to the fact that they receive richer linguistic input and start preparing for and focusing on certificate-oriented exams at private language schools; for those reasons, they probably find their English classes quite challenging. Perhaps the most exciting finding in this section is teachers' responses to the final statement which aimed to elicit their view regarding the optimal age for starting English. The overwhelming majority of the respondents (92%) support the view that English language instruction in primary school has a positive impact on young learners and should remain part of the primary school curriculum.

### **C. The coursebook**

The third group of statements elicited teachers' opinions about the prescribed coursebook used in the last grade of primary schools (*Fun Way 3*) and the coursebook used at the first grade of secondary school. The vast majority of teachers (90%) disagreed with the statement that the former is more appealing than the commercially available coursebooks used in secondary school.

With respect to its level of difficulty, teachers' views were divided: 42% indicated that *Fun Way 3* is more difficult than the coursebook chosen in the first grade of secondary school, whereas 30% indicated the opposite; 28% did not have a clear view on the matter. This is, however, natural, as teachers in secondary schools choose their own coursebook and therefore this is different from one school to another. It is to be expected that some coursebooks will be harder and others easier than *Fun Way 3*.

One of the teachers commented on this issue by stating: "The major problem is the coursebooks used in primary school – they have not been re-evaluated, modified or replaced to suit the needs of primary school students. The syllabus in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade is at a much higher level – covering past continuous and present perfect – than the syllabus in the first grade of secondary school – of an elementary level".

Regarding the statement that the coursebook in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade of secondary school is more suitable for learners' age than the *Fun Way* series in primary school, 56% of the teachers answered affirmatively whereas only 6% found it unsuitable. Moreover, 54% of the teachers disagreed with the statement that coursebooks in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade of secondary school provide continuity to the coursebook of the primary, while another 14% thought otherwise.

An overwhelming 70% of the respondents indicated that the coursebook they choose for their first graders in secondary school is of an elementary level; this choice probably aims at promoting weaker learners' attendance and learning as most classes are mixed-ability ones. At the same time, such choice of teaching material may lead to discontinuity of input since most of this material has already been taught in primary school and is mostly known to learners when entering secondary school. Unfortunately, this choice is also expected to reinforce parents' and students' decision to continue attending private language classes. Finally, 48% of the teachers agreed that it is difficult to choose a suitable coursebook for

learners of the first grade of secondary schools while 38% of the teachers had a different opinion.

#### **D. The private language institutes**

Teachers were also required to provide their views about learners' systematic attendance at private language classes and its impact on their language education at school. Nearly all of the respondents (90%) stated that the vast majority of their learners had attended private language classes before entering secondary school. Furthermore, 40% of the teachers indicated that the coursebook they chose for their first graders had already been used by some of them in the private language institute they attended; by contrast, 38% indicated the opposite. It is interesting to note that 36% of the teachers thought that learners who attend private language institutes do not pay attention in their class and seem indifferent and bored; 30% of the respondents did not share this opinion while another 34% did not indicate a clear view.

The following comment made by a teacher highlights the problem of students' low motivation and relates it to their attendance at private language institutes: "The most important problem, in my opinion, is that students attend private language classes and lack intrinsic motivation to attend English lessons in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade of secondary school. The weak students in my class are probably as weak as in the private foreign language school. Attending a B2 class in the private school doesn't necessarily mean that the student's English is at the B2 level; but it does make them *think* that they are good enough to attend such a class. Thus, when they come to my class they look down on it and regard it as too easy for them – when, in fact, they could benefit from it immensely ... They can't realise that. It is this mentality that doesn't help them to become better learners in my class".

Finally, 44% of the teachers agreed that learners who attend private language classes are better learners because they have had more hours of English language instruction; 40% of the teachers were sceptical about it while 16% of them indicated strong disagreement.

#### **E. Methodological issues**

The fifth section of the questionnaire aimed to explore teachers' views and beliefs about the teaching methodology adopted in primary and secondary schools. A high percentage of teachers (62%) seem to be aware that there are important differences in the methodology of teaching English between the two sectors while only 14% stated the opposite. Furthermore, 72% of them indicated that teaching English to primary school children involves a lot more games than teaching English to secondary school students, while only 10% thought otherwise. Similarly, 40% of the respondents agreed that there is a tendency to follow more traditional teaching approaches when teaching in secondary school, while 32% of the teachers thought that this is not true. Nearly one third of the teachers remained indecisive on this issue.

#### **F. Teachers**

The final group of statements aimed to explore (a) teachers' opinions on how to address and resolve the problem of learners' transition from primary to secondary school, and (b) their perceived needs in terms of resources. The majority of the respondents (72%) indicated that streaming first grade learners in secondary school is necessary. In particular, one teacher felt

that proper streaming would provide a solution to the problem of transition: “The transition is successful as long as there is the possibility of streaming learners in secondary school *by ability ...*”. Her point confirms the fact that although streaming is adopted as a means of student placement, in reality it is problematic, as previously explained.

The next item required teachers to state whether visiting and observing English language classes of the final grade of primary school would help them establish continuity in secondary school. The vast majority of them (80%) agreed with this suggestion and only 2% disagreed. Regarding the idea of having a record of the work covered in primary school classes, compiled by the primary English language teacher, none of the teachers disagreed with it, 86% of them indicated a need for it, while 12% did not state an opinion. Similarly, an overwhelming majority of teachers (a total of 90%) expressed their wish to have a bank of materials, including videotaped lessons from English language classes in secondary schools. Finally, 96% of them wished to have access to a complementary folder with teaching techniques appropriate for secondary school learners. This folder would include charts of progress for each student, a brief description of the personality and background profile and certain qualities to be carefully attended to. Moreover, it would ideally provide teaching techniques suitable for the specific group of learners as well as a list of activities that are regarded successful. This folder could serve as a guide and a useful resource of information for teachers who may be appointed to teach the specific class.

The problem of mixed-ability classes is raised by the majority of the teachers who decided to provide further comments in the open-ended question. One teacher claimed that “the fact that there are no levels in primary schools and all students attend the same class is partly the cause of the mixed-ability problem in secondary schools”. According to another teacher, “[t]he problem is more intense in small places. Some students have never been taught English in their primary school years (due to lack of teachers), while others have been taught English either in primary school or in primary school and at home and have reached quite a high level of proficiency compared to their peers”.

This comment reflects problems related to Greek teachers’ reluctance to serve in remote areas of the country which are not particularly popular due to their inaccessibility. As a result, some schools cannot provide English language classes as a core module of the curriculum.

## **7. Implications and concluding remarks**

Referring back to our research questions, teachers indicated that the transition from primary to secondary education, where EFL is concerned, is problematic since there seems to be no actual progress between the two sectors of education. Half of them clearly indicated a lack of continuity in the syllabus between primary and secondary schools and more than half of them thought that the coursebooks used in the two sectors are responsible for this discontinuity. One of the main reasons for this is the repetition of material and input provided in the coursebooks chosen in secondary schools; this repetition, in turn, seems to affect negatively learners’ motivation. However, students do not seem to lose their motivation entirely in learning English in secondary schools, according to teachers, probably because they are preparing for certificate-oriented exams at private language schools and thus they feel they can benefit from richer linguistic input.

It should be clear, though, that although the majority of the teachers agree on the issues above, there is less than 60% agreement among them and in any case convergence of opinion seems to be stronger on the following statements: (a) English language teaching should start in primary schools, (b) the coursebook used in the final grade of primary school is less appealing than that used at the first grade of secondary school, (c) the coursebook used at the first grade of secondary school is elementary or beginners' level, and therefore quite low, taking into consideration that learners at this stage have already had four years of English language instruction in primary schools, (d) this coursebook is methodologically sound, (e) there are differences in English language teaching methodology between primary and secondary state schools, (f) teaching primary school learners involves more games, (g) the vast majority of these teachers' learners have attended private language schools, (h) learners in the first grade of secondary school should be streamed because of variety of levels and mixed ability is a problem in secondary schools, (i) it would be good to create more links between primary and secondary classrooms: visiting, observing, shared records, bank of materials, folder with teaching techniques. With respect to the rest of the statements, teachers' expressed opinions on them seem to be quite mixed with no clear-cut agreement or disagreement (60% or more of the sample).

These results reflect the Greek situation with respect to foreign language education and highlight a number of interesting issues. As probably expected, the foreign language teaching context in Greece shares characteristics of similar contexts in other European countries (cf. Bolster, 2009). The issue of mixed-ability classes in the first grade of secondary schools as well as the wish for improved communication between primary and secondary sectors have been discussed with respect to foreign language teaching in England (Driscoll, Jones & McCrory, 2004; Clark & Trafford, 1996) and in the Netherlands (Edelenbos & Johnston 1996). Also, discontinuity in foreign language teaching and learning is a problem that has been identified in countries such as Italy and Scotland where foreign language instruction was introduced in the primary sector (Papadopoulou, 2007). Similar problems have been discussed by Nikolov & Curtain (2000) in Hungary. Hungarians realise that early language education "may be a waste of time unless secondary schools rely on and exploit what primary schools have contributed to children's foreign language development" (ibid, p. 37). As the authors state, secondary schools do not integrate children's previous language learning experiences and as a result students lose their motivation.

The issue of repetition and its relation to motivation is revisited in many countries. Clark and Trafford (1996) found that many pupils complained and felt frustrated because of the amount/extent of repetition in the syllabus covered. More recently, Bolster (2009), in a small-scale case study involving individual interviews of learners of foreign languages, found that learners who had started learning a language in primary school were slightly more motivated than those who had not.

However, apart from those similarities, the Greek situation also exhibits idiosyncratic and unique characteristics, mainly because of the thriving private sector of foreign language instruction in this country. Greek learners' choice to intensify their foreign language learning by receiving private tuition along with their state language education, has serious implications for foreign language learning within the state school system: the creation of mixed-ability classes in both the primary and secondary sector; difficulty in specifying teaching aims and content for each grade; lack of continuity in the syllabus covered in primary and secondary school; problems related to learners' transition to secondary school and lack of motivation in learning English within the state school. Such problems have been identified and discussed in other European contexts as well; however, in those contexts

solutions may be easier to find and adopt than in Greece, where the problem is compounded, and partly caused, by the 'private language school' phenomenon. The second issue which seems to be more specific in Greece is related to the use of coursebooks in both the primary and secondary sector. Teachers clearly questioned the appropriateness of the primary school coursebooks for their learners and indicated that the coursebook used at the first grade of secondary school is elementary or beginners' level and thus inappropriate for several of their students. Of course, this problem is closely related to the fact that their classes are mixed-ability ones and rarely streamed according to learners' real proficiency level.

Greek learners seem to attain high levels of proficiency in English from a very early age; the number of Greek students who sit an EFL exam (e.g., A1, A2 or even B1) upon completing their primary education is the highest in Europe. According to Cummins & Davison (2007), Greece comes first in the number of candidates sitting for those exams. However, this is an achievement of private rather than state language education and those learners are required to start from scratch when they enter secondary education. This teaching approach is expected to affect students' motivation and reinforce parents' and learners' decision to continue attending private language classes. A way to 'inject' motivation would be to have some sort of assessment along the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) guidelines. Such a report or portfolio can indicate explicitly what the primary learners have learnt. Monitoring of progress can guarantee continuity and consistency and coordination of syllabi can facilitate this process. When each grade is matched to a certain level according to the CEFR, the role of the teacher in both primary and secondary school will also be upgraded. As previously mentioned, Greece is a highly exam- and certificate-oriented country, a fact that influences both parents' and learners' attitudes towards teaching and learning. Greek learners attach particular importance to the acquisition of a certificate and are thus instrumentally motivated to learn a foreign language. However, to date, this possibility has been exclusively provided by private foreign language schools rather than by state school education. Although such exam-oriented instruction should not be a priority in language education, it makes sense to allow state schools to provide students with the opportunity to attain language certificates; this is expected to induce motivation in learners, to upgrade the status of the English language class and eventually the role of the language teacher. What is more, this kind of exam-encouraged instruction is expected to reduce learners' attendance at private language classes and thus reduce socioeconomic inequalities among them. As one teacher proposed: "Books in secondary schools should be preparing students for the English certificate exams. In this way students may feel that there is a cause they are struggling for; otherwise they lose interest".

One cannot deny that state school English language teachers are usually better qualified than their colleagues in the private language institute since they are all graduates of university departments, as opposed to private school teachers who may be holders of a C2 level certificate. Yet, state school teachers often feel helpless and demotivated as they do not have access to teaching resources and necessary in-service training. State schools receive limited funding as opposed to the affluent private language institutes, and thus cannot provide state teachers with systematic training and material which will give them the opportunity to develop and recognize, among other things, the differences and potentials of primary and secondary learners. Most importantly, due to their learners' 'mentality' and belief in the necessity of private language classes, state school teachers often feel underestimated or even rejected.

Cameron (2001, p. 106) believes that “secondary teachers will need to find ways to start from where the pupils are”. The idea of starting from the cognitive and linguistic level of the child is in line with other researchers’ views that teachers should build on learners’ previous knowledge (Bruner, 1975; Piaget, 1975; Vygotsky, 1978). Perhaps this is difficult to be achieved in the Greek EFL context as it is hard to track learners’ progress. The creation of CD ROMs portfolios (cf. Cameron, 2001) and such initiatives as meetings, teleconferences, on-line forums and reciprocal observations may provide a solution as they can help teachers to acquire information about their learners’ previous work and knowledge so as to build on it rather than repeat it. To this aim, cognitive and linguistic profiles of the learners should be made available to the foreign language teacher in the secondary school. The development of a common syllabus with realistic criteria for each grade would be useful and practical as long as it did not ignore learners’ parallel attendance at private language classes. This means that teachers would be allowed to become autonomous in the selection of their syllabus and flexible in the extent and rate of its coverage. Moreover, materials and syllabus should be properly sequenced but, most importantly, they should extend and build on learners’ varied knowledge.

A final note concerns the issue of teacher development. As teachers themselves pointed out, they feel abandoned and helpless and think that “the feedback provided by the school advisers is insufficient”. They stress the importance of attending seminars and receiving training in dealing with mixed-ability learners who have attained various levels of language proficiency. This is considered particularly important for them as they try to maintain their learners’ motivation and promote their language knowledge and skills.

The findings of our study bring to the fore important problems related to the issue of transition and continuity in foreign language education within the Greek state school. Of course these are key issues for other European countries as well where foreign languages have been recently introduced into primary schools. What is special about Greece is the fact that the vast majority of learners in both the primary and secondary sector choose to attend private language schools; this choice, although it results in learners’ attaining high levels of language proficiency quite early, ‘interferes’ with foreign language instruction in state schools and affects learners’ motivation and attitudes towards state school education. The quantitative data as well as teachers’ individual comments and views are quite alarming for language policy designers in Greece. Although teachers’ wishes and suggestions for further professional development are very promising and optimistic, serious actions should be taken to address the issues raised.

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## Appendix I: Questionnaire items and results

	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neither agree nor disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly agree</i>
<i>A. Syllabus</i>					
The syllabus of English language teaching in the last grade of primary school is very similar to that of the 1 <sup>st</sup> grade of secondary school.	6%	20%	28%	42%	4%
The transition in the English language syllabus between the final grade of primary school and the 1 <sup>st</sup> grade of secondary school is successful.	24%	32%	22%	22%	0%
There is no actual progress in the syllabus from primary to secondary level.	2%	14%	26%	36%	22%
The syllabus of the coursebook at the 1 <sup>st</sup> grade of secondary school should follow that of the coursebook used at the final grade of primary school.	18%	34%	12%	24%	12%
There is total lack of continuity between primary and secondary school	8%	18%	24%	32%	18%
<i>B. Learners</i>					
Learners' motivation in the 1 <sup>st</sup> grade of secondary school is higher than that at the final grade of primary school.	10%	22%	24%	38%	4%*
Learners' motivation in secondary school is lower because of repetition.	2%	22%	24%	42%	6%*
Weaker learners benefit from the similarities in the English language syllabus at the final grade of primary school and the 1 <sup>st</sup> grade of secondary school.	0%	16%	28%	48%	8%
Stronger learners are benefited from the richer input provided in secondary school compared to that in primary schools.	2%	18%	26%	42%	12%
Learners lose interest in learning English when they enter secondary school.	6%	48%	26%	14%	6%
Greek students should start learning English at the 1 <sup>st</sup> grade of secondary school and not in primary school.	80%	12%	2%	2%	4%
<i>C. The coursebook</i>					
The coursebook used at the final	66%	24%	4%	2%	4%

grade of primary school is more appealing than the ones used at the 1 <sup>st</sup> grade of secondary school.					
The coursebook at the 1 <sup>st</sup> grade of secondary school is more difficult than the coursebook taught at the final grade of primary school .	12%	30%	28%	30%	0%
The coursebook at the 1 <sup>st</sup> grade of secondary school is more suitable for learners' age than the one used for students of the final grade of primary school.	4%	2%	38%	48%	8%
Coursebooks at the first grade of secondary school provide a continuity to the coursebook of the final grade of primary school.	22%	32%	30%	12%	2%*
The coursebook that I am using at the 1 <sup>st</sup> grade of secondary school is an elementary (or a beginners') level book.	2%	8%	18%	46%	24%*
It is difficult to choose a suitable coursebook for learners of the 1 <sup>st</sup> grade of secondary schools.	12%	26%	12%	40%	8%*
<i>D. Private language institutes</i>					
The vast majority of my learners have attended English private schools before they enter secondary school.	2%	4%	4%	18%	72%
Some learners of the 1 <sup>st</sup> grade of secondary school in my class have already done the coursebook in the private school they attend.	6%	32%	20%	34%	6%*
The learners who attend private schools do not pay much attention in my class and seem indifferent and bored.	6%	24%	34%	20%	16%
Learners who attend private language schools are better learners because they have had more hours of English language instruction.	16%	0%	40%	28%	16%
<i>E. Methodology</i>					
The coursebook at the final grade of primary school is methodologically sound.	14%	30%	40%	14%	2%
The coursebook I am using at the 1 <sup>st</sup> grade of secondary school is methodologically sound.	0%	2%	18%	64%	14%*
There are differences in the methodology of teaching English	2%	12%	24%	46%	16%

between primary and secondary state schools in Greece.					
Teaching English to primary school children involves a lot more games than teaching English to secondary school students.	2%	8%	18%	48%	24%
There is a tendency to use less methodological approaches and be rather more 'traditional' with secondary school students.	6%	26%	28%	34%	6%
<i>F. Teachers</i>					
We attend seminars on the differences in English language teaching between primary and secondary schools (e.g., methodology, syllabus, materials etc.).	22%	24%	10%	32%	12%
It is necessary to stream learners of the 1 <sup>st</sup> grade of secondary school into levels because they belong to different levels of proficiency.	6%	8%	14%	22%	50%
Visiting and observing English language classes in primary schools would help secondary school teachers.	0%	2%	16%	34%	46%*
I would like to have a record, compiled by the primary English language teacher, with information about English language work covered in primary school classes.	0%	0%	12%	30%	56%*
The greatest problem in secondary schools is learners' mixed levels of ability.	2%	10%	16%	48%	24%
I would like to have a 'bank of materials' including videotaped lessons from English language teaching in secondary schools.	0%	2%	8%	34%	56%
I would like to have a complementary folder with methods appropriate to secondary school students.	0%	4%	0%	30%	66%

(\*) The remaining percentage of teachers did not indicate their answers to those statements.

*Open-ended question:*

Please provide your comments, ideas or insights regarding any of the above issues/questions.