Then how will they get 'the much-wanted paper'?
A multifaceted study of English as a foreign language in Greece

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Abstract

This paper reports on the results of an ongoing quantitative and qualitative study in Greece which aims to explore the following areas:

(a) learners' and parents' beliefs regarding the importance of English, and
(b) participants' beliefs regarding the quality of foreign language education in Greece as this is provided by state schools and foreign language institutes.

The data reported here is drawn from senior high school and post high school students in state institutions. Ethnographic techniques are used and the main instruments for the collection of information are face-to-face interviews and questionnaires. Our findings show that the participants consider private language institutes more reliable compared to state institutions. Tuition fees are related with high-quality education and foreign language institutes are more highly valued as they provide 'certificate'-focused curricula and more intensive tuition. One of the most important findings suggested by this study is the strong backwash effect of language certificates on the perceived value of teaching and learning of foreign languages.

Keywords: foreign language education, beliefs about language education, state language education, private language institutes, Greece

1. Introduction

This paper presents the preliminary results of a quantitative and qualitative study carried out in Greece aiming to examine Greek learners' and parents' beliefs regarding English language education as this is provided by state schools and foreign language institutes. Our aim is also to explore their beliefs about the status of English as a foreign language (henceforth EFL) in Greece and its importance for professional development. Tracing learners' and parents' beliefs about these issues seems to be important as it will help us understand their choices regarding English language education and their aspirations and expectations from the foreign language education system in Greece.

Students learning a foreign language in the classroom context bring with them a complex set of perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, experiences and expectations. All these

have long been recognized as an important set of variables influencing the learning process but also the ultimate student achievement (cf. Benson 2001, Breen 2001, Nyikos and Oxford 1993). In a meta-analysis of studies carried out by Gardner and associates, Masgoret and Gardner (2003) found that second language achievement is consistently positively related to measures of learner attitudes, motivation and orientations; the correlation of motivation with achievement in the language was found to be higher than for the other measures (p. 177).

The past twenty years, motivation in foreign language learning has regained attention among researchers and educationalists, so much so that Gardner and Tremblay (1994) talked about a "motivational renaissance". Research into motivation has been enriched with new concepts from educational psychology and as a result our understanding of the nature of motivation itself has been significantly widened. The basic assumption that triggered this renewed interest was that the classroom environment – and more generally, the contextual surroundings of action – had a much stronger motivational influence than had been proposed before (Dörnyei 2003). This assumption initiated several studies into the motivational impact of the various aspects of the learning context, and more particularly, the impact of course-specific, teacher-specific and group-specific components on learners' motivation. According to Dörnyei (ibid.), this motivational research introduced a situated approach to the study of motivation and highlighted the role of the social context in any learning activity. During the same time, the dynamic nature of motivation was recognized in Dörnyei and Ottó's process-oriented model (1998). According to it, motivation is not a fixed trait since a learner may be characterized by different types of motivation at different stages of the learning process. These ideas question the possibility of "capturing the complexity of motivation either as a precursor to action (for example as an 'orientation') or as a sustainer of action" (Spolsky 2000 cited in Lamb 2004).

The distinction between integrative and instrumental motivation was first introduced by Gardner and Lambert in the late 1950s. Today, more than half a century later, it is very difficult to distinguish them as separate concepts. The distinction proposed at that time was based on the understanding that certain identifiable social groups were associated with particular languages, with some contact between them (Lamb 2004). Since then, the world has greatly changed and, as Warschauer (2000: 512) points out, in our globalised world English is not the language of the British or the Americans but a language shared among different groups of non-native speakers. As a result, for many

learners, English is not anymore a language associated with a particular culture or geographical area, but a language associated with an international culture incorporating, among other things, business, technological innovation, world travel, sport and music (Lamb 2004). Similarly, Yashima (2002: 57) found that for Japanese university students "English symbolises the world around Japan" and suggested that some learners may have "an international posture"; this is "an interest in foreign affairs, willingness to study, work or travel overseas, a non-ethnocentric attitude toward different cultures" (ibid.).

With regard to attitudes, these are considered "to exert an important influence on an individual's behaviour since one's attitude towards a target influences the overall pattern of the person's responses to the target" (Dörnyei and Ottó 1998: 44). By attitudes towards the learning situation, in particular, we refer to the individual's reaction to anything associated with the immediate context in which the language is taught.

Finally, with respect to beliefs, these are a key construct in all disciplines that focus on the study of human behaviour and learning (Ajzen 1988 cited in Bernat and Gvozdenko 2005); a growing body of evidence suggests that beliefs play a central role in learning experience and achievements (Cotterall 2002). Their nature has been studied and interpreted within the context of different theoretical orientations: cognitive psychology, sociocultural theories, social psychology. In cognitive psychology, beliefs are seen as a component of meta-cognitive knowledge (Flavell 1987); this includes how individuals perceive themselves as learners and thinkers. According to sociocultural theories, beliefs are considered to provide us with the basis on which we interpret new experiences and information (Alexander, Schallert and Hare 1991). Finally, in social psychology beliefs are understandings which originate in an individual's life history and previous educational experiences and form the basis for value judgments (Dole and Sinatra 1994). All these theories recognize that beliefs are both the result of formal and informal learning experiences but also determinants of any subsequent learning (Sakui and Gaies 1999).

Although beliefs have been said to 'act as very strong filters of reality' (Arnold 1999: 256), Wenden (2001) argues that foreign and second language learner beliefs, so far, have been a neglected variable. Some researchers have recognized the importance of learner beliefs in the learning context and studied their impact on learners' behaviour. McDonough (1995), in particular, pointed out that beliefs can be important stimuli for

action: what we believe we are doing, what we think is important, how we choose to behave influence our decisions as to how to proceed. With respect to language learning, in particular, beliefs may concern, among other things, what learners believe about the nature of language, the role of the instructor, the language-learning task, their personal language learning strengths and limitations (Sakui and Gaies 1999). More recent research has indicated that people's choices regarding which language they are going to learn and use are significantly affected by their beliefs regarding not only the foreign language selected but also their professional needs (Angouri 2007, Eurobarometer [54] 2001).

Due to the importance of learners' motivation, attitudes and beliefs for the learning process and their final achievement as well as due to the shortage of relevant research in Greece, this set of variables seems to deserve further investigation. In the remainder of this paper, we are presenting some information about the teaching context of English as a Foreign Language in Greece and the details of our study.

2. The Greek EFL context

Foreign language instruction in Greece is provided in both state schools and private language institutes. With respect to state education, English is the first foreign language young learners are taught at the third year of primary education. At the fifth grade, a second foreign language, either French or German, is added to the curriculum. Two foreign languages are similarly taught in junior high school (the first three years of secondary education): the instruction of English is compulsory together with the instruction of a second foreign language, the choice being once more between French and German. In senior high school (the last three years of secondary education), Greek learners are required to take one foreign language and choose among English, French or German; a second foreign language is optional.

English language instruction in Greece is also provided by foreign language institutes. This is a thriving private sector which provides intensive foreign language tuition and targets students of all ages, but most commonly learners of 8 years old and above. Such courses are not compulsory, are mostly exam-oriented and train learners so as to be able to sit for specialized exams which will allow them, if successful, to obtain a language certificate (Mattheoudakis and Alexiou 2009). The fact is that state schools provide fewer contact hours and less intensive courses than private language institutes. According to Batziakas (2006), there are currently almost 9,000 private English

language institutes in Greece with an average of 200 students each. According to recent research, about 80% of Greek school children attend foreign language institutes and Greek families spend on average about 880 million euros on foreign language school fees and textbooks. Thus, most students nowadays attend English language courses at both state schools and private language institutes.

Due to several factors relating to students' tutorial schooling, e.g., differences in the age of entry, differences in contact hours, lack of standardization in the services provided, and, of course, variability in the students' rate of learning, their achievements in English language classes at state school vary widely (Mattheoudakis and Nicolaidis 2005).

The Greek EFL context is unique in Europe and actually mirrors Greek parents' and learners' keen interest in foreign language education. As Greek is a lesser spoken language, Greeks strongly believe in the necessity of mastering at least one foreign language which will allow them to communicate with speakers of other languages inside or outside the borders of their country. English, occupying a dominant place globally, is expected to provide them with important educational, professional and socioeconomic opportunities and thus it is the first foreign language most Greeks choose to learn.

Within this context, the present study should be seen as an attempt to trace Greek learners' beliefs about the quality of English language education in Greece and the importance of EFL for their professional development.

3. The study

This study aims at addressing two key aspects of Greek foreign language education, in general, and EFL, in particular, in order to pave the way for a detailed in-depth project in the area. More specifically we discuss here:

- Greek learners' and parents' beliefs regarding the importance of English
- Participants' beliefs and attitudes towards the quality of foreign language education in Greece as this is provided by state schools and foreign language institutes (frontistiria).

Ethnographic techniques were used and the main instruments for the collection of information were semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. The tools for the data collection were designed on the basis of emic, participant observations logged by an

EFL teacher over the course of one year. The questionnaire was chosen as the most appropriate instrument for collection of data from a range of geographical areas in order to provide us with a comparative sample from urban and sub urban centres. The analysis of the questionnaire data was followed by semi structured interviews with a selected sample in order to collect qualitative accounts and to shed light on the patterns emerging from the quantitative data. As Seliger and Shohamy (1989) and DeVaus (2002), among many others, suggest, the research methods and techniques adopted in any research project depend upon the questions and the focus of the researcher. Accordingly, this study takes a mixed methods approach and adopts a pragmatist's stance, according to which methodologies represent a collection of techniques (Bryman, 2001; Rossman and Wilson, 1985), as opposed to a purist's stance, which would see qualitative and quantitative methods as being incompatible (see Angouri, 2010 for a discussion). The interviews followed the distribution of the questionnaires and the aim was to elicit rich accounts for the responses offered by the participants at the questionnaires. In line with Odell, Goswami and Herrington (1983), the interviews were discourse based (i.e. the questionnaire responses were used as a stimulus to elicit further accounts on the issues addressed by the study). The aim of the different datasets is to shed light on the complex phenomenon under study and triangulate the findings. Regarding the latter, triangulation is often one of the key reasons for undertaking mixed methods research. The term, however, is not used consistently among researchers. In line with Harden and Thomas (2005), we take the view that data from different sources often reveal conflicting realities. We consider, however, that the different datasets reveal and provide us with a better understanding of the different aspects of our participants' perceptions of these realities and hence are helpful for a holistic analysis of the questions the study raises.

We discuss the procedures we applied in the study in more detail in the next section.

3.1 Procedure

We designed this study in three main phases. We carried out informal discussions with experienced EFL teachers (years of experience ≥ 5) to log their observations regarding students' (and other important stakeholders', e.g. parents') attitudes and beliefs towards foreign language provision. Zigrika also observed Lykeia and IEK in Leros and Serres and we formulated the aims of the project (as in section 3). The intention of that first stage was not to gather data for analysis but to record teachers' and students' beliefs and attitudes and ensure that the project derives from the participants' real life concerns

rather than our own experiences and research realities. From the outset, we clarified our shared objectives and ensured that we addressed ethical issues. All participants had to give their informed consent to participate in the research. The second phase of the study, which constitutes the focus of this paper, is the main pilot of the key instruments we used to collect information – that is, the questionnaires and discourse based interviews (Odell et al. 1983) – and the exploratory stage of our work. We started collecting data in February 2007 and the project is on going. The third phase of this study involves collecting the main body of data (authors in preparation).

We now turn to a detailed description of the participants and the tools we used for the collection of information.

3.2 Participants and tools

For the needs of this study, data were collected in two types of educational institutions. Namely, Senior High Schools (Lykeia – last three years of secondary education) and post High School institutions (IEK – tertiary education institutions aiming at the development of professional skills). The latter attracts adult students (18+). The reason why the second group was selected was to explore the possible effect of age in the choices the students make regarding foreign language and, by extension, the differences in perceptions of students who have experienced the job market and are more vocationally oriented compared to the Lykeio stratum. Institutions were selected from different geographical areas. Further selection criteria did not apply as any Lykeion/IEK in the country is part of the target population, and for this stage of the project we aimed at convenience sampling (where the researchers had immediate access and the institutions were willing and volunteered to collaborate with the team). Given that we report here on the exploratory stage of a research project which we aim to carry out in most parts of the country (stage three), we do not consider convenience sampling a limitation. 120 students have participated in the project so far. Salient information is provided in the table below.

Table 1. Overview of the design

Lykeia		**IEK**	
Leros and Serres	14 Interviews	Leros and Serres	8 Interviews
Leros and Arta	69 Questionnaires	Arta and Corfu	29 Questionnaires
Population		**Population**	
Students between 16-18 years of age, with		Students between 20-28 years of age, with	

previous knowledge of English. The students are holders of B2 and, more rarely, of C2 certificates.	previous knowledge of English. The students are holders of B2 certificates or are at B2 level.

The questionnaire consists of 28 closed questions which were answered on a 5-point Likert Scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). Mid-point response was included in order to avoid directional answers. The questionnaire items comprise 8 control questions to avoid response acquiescence ('yea-saying' tendency).

The interviews lasted 50 minutes on average and we followed the following format: observed phenomenon plus follow-up question. The interviews were transcribed and coded. The two aspects of English language provision in Greece discussed above (section 3) provided the main axis for the organisation of the qualitative data.

4. Findings and discussion

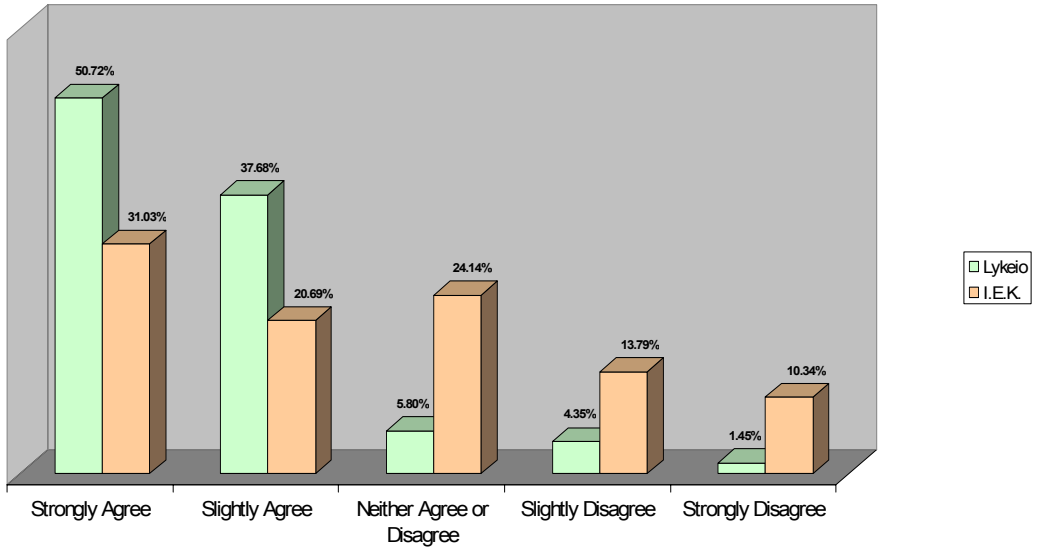
Our analysis of the quantitative data (see figures below) reveals that although there are some individual differences between the different schools and types of institutions we studied, there is a clear pattern regarding students' beliefs about the importance of English as well as the quality of foreign language provision in the country. In this section we organise our findings under the two key aspects we discussed so far: (a) the importance of English for professional development, and (b) the quality of English language provision in state schools and private language institutes (frontistiria). Due to space limitations, the aim of this paper is to provide an overview of our overall findings; hence, data are presented in clusters (Lykeia/IEK) and details on individual institutions are not included.

4.1 The importance of English for professional development

The importance of English as a Lingua Franca in the context of the current international nature of socio-economic activity, is generally agreed upon. Despite the fact that the linguistic ecology of modern workplaces is dynamic, rich and diverse and does not rely on one language only (e.g. Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta 2005), English is undoubtedly a useful language for professional development as recent research has shown (e.g. Angouri, 2009). This is also reflected in the responses of the participants who seem to consider knowledge of the language an important qualification in the job market (figure 1). There is, however, an interesting discrepancy between the students of

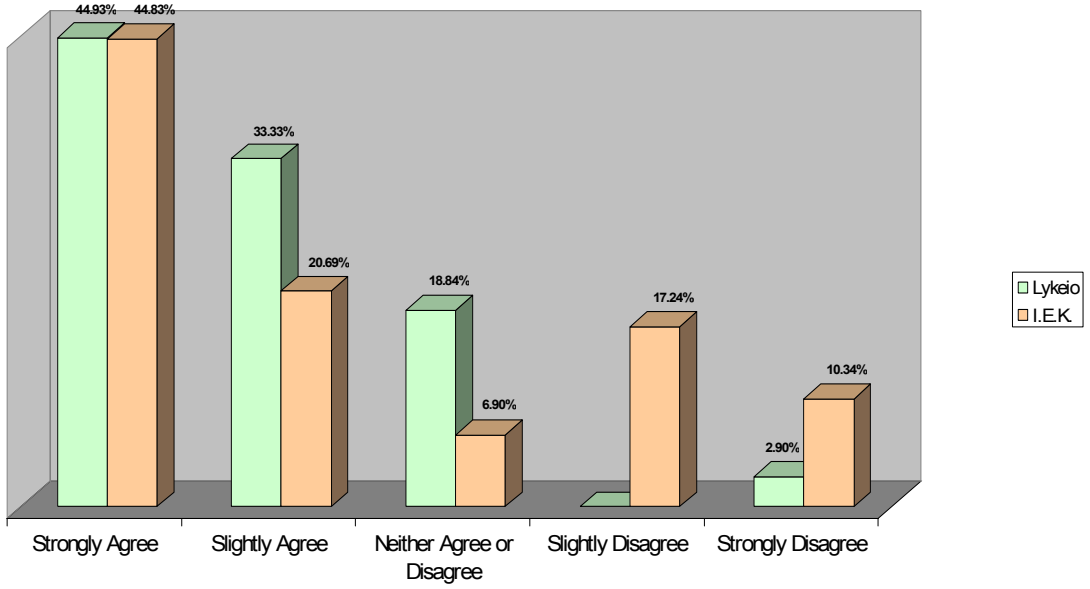
Lykeia and those of IEK with the latter showing to be more skeptical towards the overall importance of the language *per se*.

Figure 1. Knowledge of English is a necessary qualification for any job



The majority of both strata, however, seem to be in agreement regarding the importance of *certified* knowledge of the language (figure 2). This is an important point which our study has shown and we aim to further explore; namely, the difference between the perceived importance of the language for contemporary life and the perceived significance of EFL certificates in the local (Greek) job market.

Figure 2. Certified knowledge of English is necessary, especially if I need to find a job



As a student from a Lykeio in Leros suggested:

1. "You need it [English] to find a job, a good job (.) Those who are more qualified, that is with many certificates, are those to be hired and an English language certificate is an important one (.)"

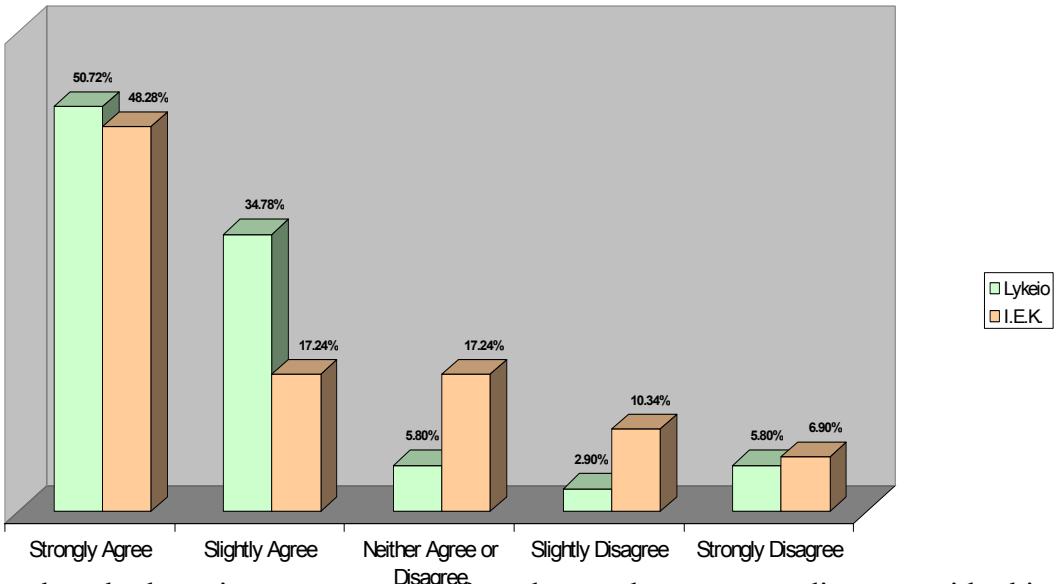
This quote is representative of the views of both Lykeia and IEK students. Explicit accounts such as the one below are frequent in our datasets:

2. "I learned English for getting a job… . I learned it because I had to do it. I had to include it in my CV."

The analysis of our interview data has shown that the high status of English is related to the following three categories in order of frequency in the dataset. The most frequently cited accounts in the interview data have to do with (a) the perceived usefulness of certificates for career development, followed by (b) the perceived usefulness of the language for technology applications (e.g. use of internet), and finally, (c) its perceived usefulness for covering basic communication needs (e.g. when traveling).

At the same time the importance of parents' and more generally societal/peer influence on students' opinion became evident (figure 3). Both strata report explicitly on this.

Figure 3. My parents told me that a certificate in English would be an important qualification for finding a good job



Even though there is a percentage of students who seem to disagree with this statement (6% and 7% of Lykeio and IEK students respectively), the majority of

responses indicate a strong agreement. The interview data also further highlight the extent of this influence on the students' choices. As a Lykeio student suggests:

> 3. "My parents told me to start English classes because they thought knowledge of English is necessary for me in order to find a good job in the future."

The parents who seem to be the agents' of choice also operate under their respective peer influence. This is nicely captured in the quote below:

> 4. "Parents act mechanically when it comes to send their children to frontistirio to learn English. That's what everybody else does; so, why not them?"

The importance the society attributes to acquiring language certificates was proven by our study. Both younger students (Lykeio) and those who are in tertiary education (IEK) clearly recognize the long tradition of the significance in accumulating foreign language certificates.

> 5. "Greeks were always fans of the belief that the more degrees someone has the better it is for their future development! … from a young age we are brain-washed to take English exams."

Thus, the interviewees, despite being sometimes skeptical towards the actual value of certificates, in most cases perpetuate this tradition while acknowledging the motivation behind taking the exams.

> 6. "It is society that demands English to be learned at a very good level… We are stressed to get degrees so as to find a good job and in the end I don't know if it is worth it…"

Our study so far has lent support to the observations that led us to explore this topic; English has a high status in the Greek society and is reported as an important language for the 'job market'. However, our work brings to the fore the uniqueness of our society where language certificates become part of the qualifications students are expected to have in order to build up their professional trajectory.

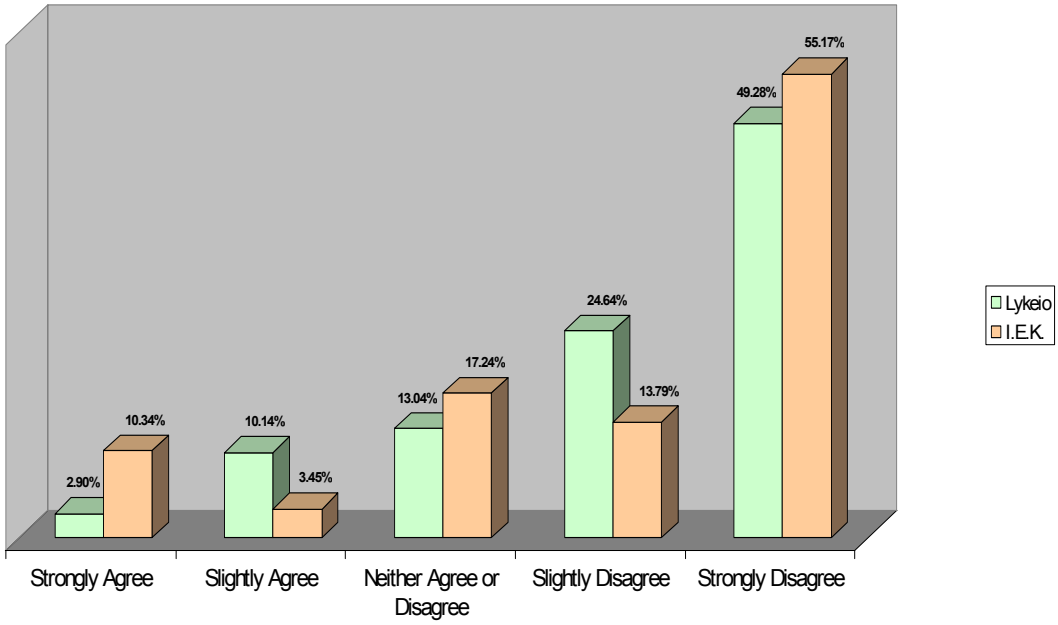
Accordingly, one would expect that English as taught in state schools would be highly regarded as a subject and well attended by the student population. This, however, is not the case, indicating another issue that is worth exploring in relation to the characteristics of language learning in the Greek socioeconomic environment.

4.2 The quality of English language provision in Greece: State schools vs. frontistiria

The fact that frontistiria play an important role in foreign language education in Greece is certainly not new to many a reader. Our purpose in this project is to try and document

the reasons why. As suggested by language teachers in the first stage of our research, English classes at school are not typically considered by the students an 'important subject'. This observation would match the intuitive knowledge of most readers who happen to be familiar with the Greek educational system. The quantitative data verified our hypothesis (figure 4).

Figure 4. English is actually learned at state schools and not at foreign language institutes



The analysis of the interview data showed that the following features of English language provision in state schools, as these are perceived by students, make foreign language institutes a necessary alternative: (a) tuition not focused on language certificates, (b) large groups of students, (c) mixed level audience, (d) free tuition, (e) uninteresting lessons, (f) unmotivated teachers, (g) state schools not issuing/awarding certificates.

Even though this research is still at early stages, we consider these themes fruitful for further study. Evidently, these factors suggest students' perceptions and a larger sample would be needed for a more detailed and better informed picture to emerge. However, our interviewees raise some points worth mentioning. A student from IEK suggests:

> 7. "In state schools you don't pay, so you are more relaxed… Since the tuition fees were expensive I didn't like to go there (frontistirio) without having studied."

The perceptions of 'free' education raise important points that go beyond the scope of this particular paper. We consider important to note, however, that this is one of the most recurrent accounts in our interviews dataset even among the younger students where one may have expected that 'fees' do not immediately affect them (as compared to IEK students who may self-finance their studies).

8. " ... my fellow students think that the frontistirio is better than school because they pay fees; they feel that more attention is paid there to their progress than at school. If there were fees at school, then, I think, students would be more interested."

The question one would be tempted to ask is if these accounts hold good only in relation to English language provision or they would apply to other subjects traditionally covered by frontistiria (and what the implications may be). The last point we would like to raise is that frontistiria seem to have become an official part of the educational system. Both parents but also teachers seem to factor in tuition in a frontistirio from their respective ends. Teachers seem to expect the frontistirio to cover perceived gaps in state school provision:

9. "Our teachers say: 'Do you expect to learn English here (school class)? … you learn what you need in frontistirio.'"

While parents, on the other hand, are reported to regard frontistirio as an inseparable part of language tuition. As an IEK student stated:

10. "The budget of the Greek household includes the fees for the frontistirio."

However, the majority of students in our sample seem to suggest that frontistiria are a necessary second best while they would prefer to be given the chance to learn in a state school. Further to this, the participants mentioned the need for better infrastructure in order for state schools to provide a viable alternative to private tuition institutes. We will further pursue this in our main study. We consider it, however, an important finding bearing immediate implications that would need to be followed up by central educational bodies.

5. Concluding remarks

Given the importance and need for high quality language education, our project sheds light on the needs and expectations of Greek language learners and aims to conclude with recommendations for improving current practices in state school language provision.

Even though the present paper reports on data from a relatively small sample of students, important patterns seem to have emerged. As perhaps expected, English is considered to be an international language and as such useful for vocational purposes. The perceived status of the language is further highlighted in the Greek society given the importance of competitiveness in an unstable market where unemployment rates are high. This reality which is directly related to the broader socioeconomic context could at least partly explain the strong backwash effect of language certificates on the very tuition. As a parent mentioned to one of the authors recently, "I told my daughter I expect you to get (names certificate); you can learn the language later when you need it". Even though this anecdote does not constitute empirical evidence, it encapsulates in its extremity the view expressed by the majority of the participants in our sample regarding the vocational element of students' and parents' approach to language education.

Against this backdrop, language provision in state institutions is reported to be rather devaluated. Large groups and mixed competence audiences in addition to a curriculum that does not match the vocational expectations of students and parents, make the participants suggest that frontistiria are more reliable as compared to state schools. An interesting interrelated factor shown by our study is the importance attributed to tuition fees where the very existence of the 'fee' seems to be equivalent to highly regarded education. We close the paper by passing on the floor to one of our participants:

"We are raised believing that: 'you get what you pay for'. I think reliable service is provided only if it is paid. Nothing is given for free."

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