CHAPTER SEVEN

THE PROJECT AS A MEANS OF DEVELOPING STUDENTS' LANGUAGE SKILLS ACCORDING TO CURRICULUM

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Abstract

The Knowledge Society gives great importance to the acquisition and further development of skills so that young people will be able to improve job prospects, and achieve personal fulfilment, social inclusion and active citizenship. Communication skills are rated as more important than literacy ones, and education becomes the key to economic survival in the 21st century. In this context, education takes the form of "training" in 21st century skills incorporated in the curriculum with innovative approaches to teaching and learning in order to establish a creative and open educational environment of collaborative knowledge construction, able to respond to students' diverse needs and abilities in the European context, where communication in foreign languages and the development of 'transversal' competences are promoted. Within this trend, the project, introduced as a compulsory "subject", aims to enhance collaborative and experiential learning, initiate students into research, promote a communicative and intercultural approach, and help students build skills.

In view of the above, this paper examines the contribution of project work, as defined in the curriculum, while teaching a foreign language or implementing an innovative program in secondary education, and also reports on a survey conducted in 49 secondary schools of Central Macedonia, Greece. Results from the statistical analysis confirmed that projects contribute to students' developing skills, such as listening, speaking, intercultural communication and use of technology.

Introduction

In the era of globalization, the use of new technologies does away with geographical borders, diversifies communication and language learning, and undisputedly affects language policy worldwide. At the same time, new skills are required by young people, as the world of business requires employees to work as a team, to access and analyze information and think critically to solve problems (Boss & Krauss, 2007).

As school assumingly prepares students for future careers, the present study investigates the skills that students may develop through working with projects.

2. Background

2.1 Language Policy in the Global and European Contexts

Since communication is a key term in the global era, communication skills, which are not only vocational but life skills as well, are valued as more important than literacy or Information & Communication Technologies (ICT) skills. This means that communication is not limited to the labor market, but is also related to people's need to share experiences and emotions, solve problems and improve their relationships. In this framework, education is taking the form of "training" in 21st century skills, which are incorporated into the curriculum, so that students can meet the needs of the labor market and increase their employability (Block & Cameron, 2002).

As far as teachers are concerned, it is necessary for them not only to fulfil predetermined objectives of the curriculum, but also to understand how the curriculum relates education to wider social and cultural relations (Pennycook, 1994), and select culturally sensitive and efficient methods, get to know students' needs, and encourage them to use foreign language as a tool to participate in the growing global community (McKay, 2002). Such initiatives include teacher upgrading and professional development, linking education and training with the needs of society, adapting the role of the School Principal to that of a leader, and building schools that meet the needs of the community and the knowledge society, i.e., team work, learning networks and emphasis on learning outcomes (Day, Fernandez, Hauge, & Moller, 2000).

Also considering that an advanced knowledge society is the key to higher growth and employment (Αλαχιώτης & Καρατζιά-Σταυλιώτη, 2009), and that learning is not related only to knowledge, further

initiatives are taken to connect education to the labor market (Επίσημη Εφημερίδα της Ευρωπαϊκής Ένωσης, 2010; Eurydice, 2010), and support lifelong learning (Committee of the European Communities, 2007; Παιδαγωγικό Ινστιτούτο, 2009a,b).

In Europe, in particular, the Council of Europe (2006) supports the development of key competences, such as communication in a foreign language, digital competence, cultural awareness and metacognitive skills (Committee of the European Communities, 2007; Παιδαγωγικό Ινστιτούτο, 2009a,b). More specifically, eight key competences, which are necessary for personal development, active citizenship, and employability, are promoted in Europe (Αλαχιώτης & Καρατζιά-Σταυλιώτη, 2009). They include "traditional" competences like mother tongue, foreign languages, basic competences in maths and science, and digital competence, but also the more "transversal" ones such as learning to learn, social and civic competence, initiative taking and entrepreneurship, and cultural awareness and expression (Committee of European Communities, 2007; Παιδαγωγικό Ινστιτούτο, 2009a, b).

In addition, the Common European Framework of Reference for languages describes the necessary communicative competences learners should have in order to communicate effectively in different contexts, and sets the goals of language teaching and learning (CEFR, 2001).

As a result, the majority of countries in Europe include the above competences in their curricula and give equal emphasis on the skills that should be developed in foreign languages (listening, speaking, reading and writing) (Eurydice, 2008, pp. 87, 89).

2.2 Language policy in Greece: Curriculum and innovative programs

In Greece, the Interdisciplinary Curriculum Framework (Δ.Ε.Π.Π.Σ. 2003) gives equal emphasis to the knowledge and skills the learner should acquire (Αλαχιώτης & Καρατζιά-Σταυλιώτη, 2009), promotes multilingualism and multicultural awareness, and focuses language teaching on learners' needs and the communicative events in which they might be involved. It also describes the skills the learner should acquire, i.e., receptive and productive skills, learning and communication strategies, mediation, and multicultural awareness (Δ.Ε.Π.Π.Σ., 2003, pp. 366-378, 390).

The new Unified Curriculum for Foreign Languages (ΕΠΣ-ΞΓ, 2011) also promotes learners' skill development, critical thinking and mediation. Moreover, it emphasizes multi-literacies connected to multimodality of

texts in modern environments of communication, and the use of New Technologies in communication.

One way to achieve these goals is using projects, included in the educational material designed to support interdisciplinarity, by which students use skills in order to "achieve something" (Χρυσοχόος et al., 2006). For example, the new teaching material for the English language in Junior Secondary Education has incorporated the project as a means of a holistic approach to knowledge, interdisciplinarity and content evaluation (Chryshochoos, 2009; Trim, 2007; Χρυσοχόος, Κοσοβίτσα, & Thompson 2004), and it is proposed as an alternative "method" of teaching and learning, research and collaborative work (Παιδαγωγικό Ινστιτούτο, 2009b), counseling, evaluation (Ματσαγγούρας, 2011), and innovation.

In this context, the Unified Curriculum for Foreign Languages for compulsory education aims at creating a citizen able to: (a) cope effectively in different social contexts; (b) act as an intercultural and interlingual mediator to facilitate communication between people from different social or cultural groups; (c) use the language in order to participate in activities of the international community; (d) effectively use linguistic, social and cultural concepts; (e) use the acquired knowledge, experience and strategies to communicate with others respecting their differences, or to solve problems (ΕΠΣ-ΞΓ, 2011, pp. 4-9).

Since projects support an interdisciplinary and holistic approach to knowledge, skill development, cooperation and negotiation, information search, and use of digital tools by means of the foreign language, they have been officially introduced into the Greek Curriculum, and have been the core of innovative interdisciplinary and European programs, which aim at exploratory, experiential and cooperative learning, skills development, students' positive attitudes and behaviors (Σπυροπούλου et al. 2008), critical thinking and active citizenship, and the opening of school to society.

2.3 The project in language teaching and learning

In view of the above, the project provides many opportunities to apply most academic skills, but also intellectual skills, such as observing, classifying, investigating, hypothesizing, and predicting (Helm & Katz, 2001). It is suggested as a student-centered approach which promotes experiential learning and a more flexible and attractive learning environment, contributes to the learner's skills development and autonomy, bridges the gap between theory and practice, connects school to the community, integrates skills in a natural way through its inerdisciplinarity, and makes

the Curriculum more flexible (Δάλκος, 2002; Dewey, 1963; Fried-Booth, 2002; Phillips, Burwood & Dunford, 1999; Tudor, 1993; Φούρλαρη & Πετρίδου, 2008).

Besides, it is an approach based on action and specific work, and ends up in a final product, a tangible result, easily perceived and able to be evaluated although its value lies not in the final product but in the process towards it, offering a lot of chances to focus on speech appropriateness and cooperate on a topic which is defined by the students themselves and not imposed on them (Βαϊνά, 1996; Fried-Booth, 2002; Stoller, 1997; Φούρλαρη & Πετρίδου, 2008). In addition, by use of digital tools, the limitations of the traditional class can be abolished, and students can work on a project in different places of the world.

As far as methodology is concerned, due to its interdisciplinary nature, the project enhances a combination of different areas of curriculum subjects and principles (Κωφού, 2010), which sets scientific knowledge in the service of social problems when research is turned into action (Βαϊνά, 1996; Ματσαγγούρας, 2006; Φούρλαρη & Πετρίδου, 2008).

At the same time, according to the results of a study of more than 11,000 individuals aged eleven to thirty-one reported by Trilling and Fadel (2009), we observe a change in students' attitudes, behaviors and expectations, which can be summarized as follows: Freedom of choice and expression of one's personal views; customization and personalization, i.e., the ability to change things to meet one's needs; thorough testing and analysis; integrity and honesty in dealing with others (also with businesses, government and educational institutions); integration of entertainment and gaming at work, learning and social life; collaboration and building relationships vital to what one does; speed of communication, information and response to questions and messages; innovation in products, services, employers and schools, and generally in life (Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

As for teachers, making use of their personal, educational and course-planning skills (Tudor, 1993), they motivate, co-ordinate, supervise (Ταρατόρη-Τσαλκατίδου, 1996; Χρυσαφίδης, 2006), give advice and solve problems throughout the whole process, and plan future learning activities (Littlewood, 1981). Teachers also help students set goals and take action, facilitate learning by digital tools, cooperate with school stakeholders, build a learning community, create positive attitudes to learning and school life, and contribute through collaboration to social cohesion. By integrating digital tools into the project, they further affect students' motivation, interest and will of participation.

The above literature is proved in the present research, the results of which show that the project really contributes to the development of skills such as communication, cultural and environmental awareness, and collaboration, as well as of students' positive attitudes to learning.

3. The Study

3.1 Research Methodology

The present study is a survey which took place in 49 secondary schools in the Region of Education of Central Macedonia (a stratified representative sample of 10% of the population of 488 schools of the Region of Education of Central Macedonia) on projects implemented during the school years 2008-2009 and 2009-2010, by use of a survey questionnaire (see also Kofou, 2011; Κωφού, 2012). It aimed, among other things we will not refer to here, to look into project and foreign language teaching contribution to students' skills development, and students and teachers' attitudes toward it.

In particular, the survey involved 736 students, 59% girls and 41% boys and 70 teachers, 77% female and 23% male, of the following fields: 60% of Humanities, of whom 46% of Foreign Languages, 31% of Science and Technology and 9% of other fields (Music and Physical Education).

The questionnaire, due to lack of a relative research tool, was constructed on the basis of six axes according to literature review, curricula and the CEFR: (a) students and teachers' motives, interests and needs (personal interest, motivation by a classmate/colleague, textbook, the curriculum); (b) ways of project implementation (topic, organization, information collection, duration, collaboration and coordination, final product, presentation); (c) project planning, aims and evaluation (schedule, interdisciplinarity, use of multiple intelligences etc); (d) students' skill development (metacognitive skills like critical thinking, action taking, goal setting, ICT and collaboration, as well as foreign language skills, learning strategies, mediation and cultural awareness); (e) foreign language involvement (information search, dictionary use, mediation, communication and data presentation, as well as the activities and the texts used in the project); (f) students and teachers' views and attitudes, possible benefits and limitations, and the necessity of teacher training.

All in all, 736 student and 70 teacher questionnaires were finally collected, and the data (due to their great number) were grouped so as to allow for their presentation (in chart pies), interpretation and generalization.

For the statistical analysis of data, Factor Analysis of Correspondence (FAC) was used, which allows simultaneous statistical processing of variables and description of the phenomenon, while it requires no a priori assumption. This method was selected because of the large number of the qualitative data as it is "a multivariate technique that may be applied to any type of data and to any number of data points" (Teil, 1975, p. 3). In fact, there were 288 variables (they are symbolized by the letter "y" and a number in the results below) for the students and 300 for the teachers. The variables, the so-called factors form by two the factorial axes which depict the correlation of the variables. It is assumed that the values Correlation Cor ≥ 200, and Contribution Ctr =.1000/No of variables are satisfactory for the construction of the factorial axes and the interpretation of the data. In our study, the variables contributing to the construction of the factorial axes were the ones with the indexes Correlation Cor ≥ 200, and Contribution Ctr=4 (Αναστασιάδου, 2008; Bezencri, 1973; Παπαδημητρίου, 1994, 2007). In fact, the examination of the indexes Cor and Ctr defines which of the factorial axes each variable is better depicted on, and the extent to which it participates in their construction. Then, the factorial axes form by two the factorial planes, on which we can see the interpretation of the data to a certain percentage. In the present study, from the four factorial planes the variables (y) related to the topic are depicted in Figures 7-1, 7-2, 7-3 and 7-6 below.

3.2 Results and discussion

Variable grouping and statistical analysis have led to the following results for project implementation in secondary education: Female participation prevails in project implementation for both students and teachers. Even though Physics and Technology teachers are depicted in FAC, the greatest percentage of the participating teachers is that of foreign language ones. This explains the great number of projects implemented in the foreign language course or in European programs. Other forms of projects, done in secondary education, concern interdisciplinary or environmental projects. It seems that innovative programs have gained ground in secondary education in Greece, and teachers recognize the significance of projects in learning and school life.

Regarding the first axis of the research, motivation comes from personal interest for both students and teachers. The statistical analysis, however, also projects other factors for teacher motivation, such as the role of teachers in urging their colleagues to do a project, the curriculum, the textbook and teaching time filling. Practice, according to what the

subjects of the study stated, has shown that both students and teachers really like doing projects at school, and the latter prefer project programs to other school subjects to fill their teaching time.

As for the second axis, project implementation, it is evident from the analysis that project topics are related to real world issues, such as the environment or problems of various countries, and other fields of the curriculum. Both students and teachers take part in the structure of the project, for which information is collected by means of the internet or a questionnaire. Projects are short, medium or long, and are implemented individually, in class, or in cooperation with other classes or schools. They are mainly production projects (written reports, leaflets, posters etc), but also presentations and, in some cases, constructions. Presentations take place in class, at school or at conference centres. There is also some cooperation with the local community or other countries, and this helps the school open up to society. This has been proved to further motivate students to participate in future projects, come in contact with students from other schools, present their work in public and win prizes. That was mostly evident among students who participated in projects of Model United Nations, an assimilation of a conference of the United Nations.

As far as the third axis is concerned, project planning has to do with group forming and goal setting. What is evaluated at the end of the project is methodology and goal achievement which, according to most respondents, is connected to collaboration, communication and school connectivity to society. This stage of the project should be given greater importance in project planning, as sometimes what is taken into account is knowledge and not the skills students should develop, which, as already discussed, are vital for their personal and professional development. This happens because each teacher, in order to do a project is asked to expand knowledge in a particular field and connect it to their discipline in project planning, especially in Senior High School.

The goals set in project planning are connected with the fourth axis, i.e., skill development. In particular, FAC has shown the following results for skills set by teachers as objectives of project implementation (Fig. 7-1): Project work aims at (a) foreign language learning (y132), (b) enhancing expertise (y154), (c) sensitizing students to global problems (y126), (d) developing environmental awareness (y146), (e) action taking (y158), (f) developing skills (y155), (g) critical thinking (y156), and (h) using New Technologies (y135). The numbers in brackets represent the variables of the questionnaire used in the study as depicted on the table of variable correlation and contribution resulted from FAC. We have already mentioned that for the present study we selected to represent those

variables related to the topic of this paper and we put them on the left and right of 0 point, i.e., in the negative and positive part of the axis as represented in the results of FAC for the four factorial axes. This representation shows the differentiation of the subjects' responses and variable grouping on the left and right part of the axis regardless of their height. As for the variables put above and below the horizontal line, we selected all relevant variables from the factorial planes for teachers' and students' responses, and we grouped them in this way to represent response similarity or differentiation.
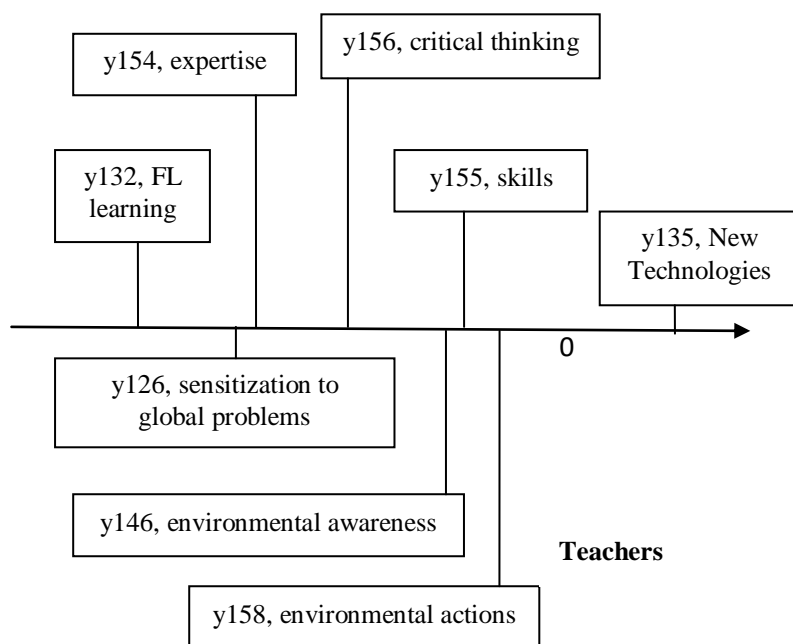

Figure 7-1: Teacher objectives of project implementation

As for foreign language involvement in skill development, i.e., the fifth axis of the research, it is mostly related to ICT use for information search, selection and processing, and listening comprehension and speaking, which helps students communicate with peers from other countries. These components have an impact on the selection of activities done in class, mainly communication and mediation ones,

media, mainly electronic ones, and texts, mainly articles, as derived
from the data analysis. More specifically, FAC has shown that the
skills developed in the foreign language (Fig. 7-2), according to the
students, concern (a) information search and presentation (y139) and
(b) cultural awareness (y152), while, according to the teachers, (a)
dictionary use (y231), (b) information search (y230), (c) presentation
of research results (y234), (d) oral and written communication (y233),
(e) mediation (y232), (f) multicultural awareness (y178), (g)
development of receptive and productive skills (y175), (h) learning and
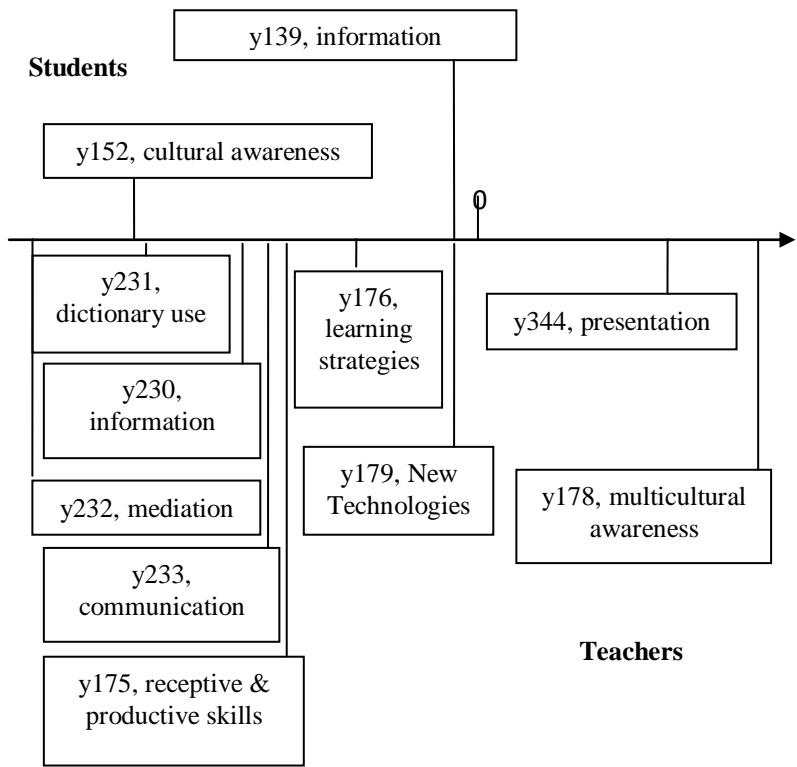communication strategies (y176), and (i) use of New Technologies
(y179).

Figure 7-2: Skill development in the foreign language

However, not much project implementation is done in a foreign language, especially in English, in Senior High School even though it is included in the curriculum. Thus, as foreign languages are among the key competences students should acquire, there is ground for greater foreign language involvement in projects, which will give students the opportunity to use the language in authentic contexts for real purposes.

Other skills, not dependent on foreign language involvement, that were developed throughout projects (Fig. 7-3), are (a) goal setting (y143), (b) action taking (y142) for students, and (a) environmental awareness (y146) and (b) action taking (y158) for teachers. This proves that projects are connected to real world issues, and it is particularly important for environmental protection, volunteerism and active citizenship.
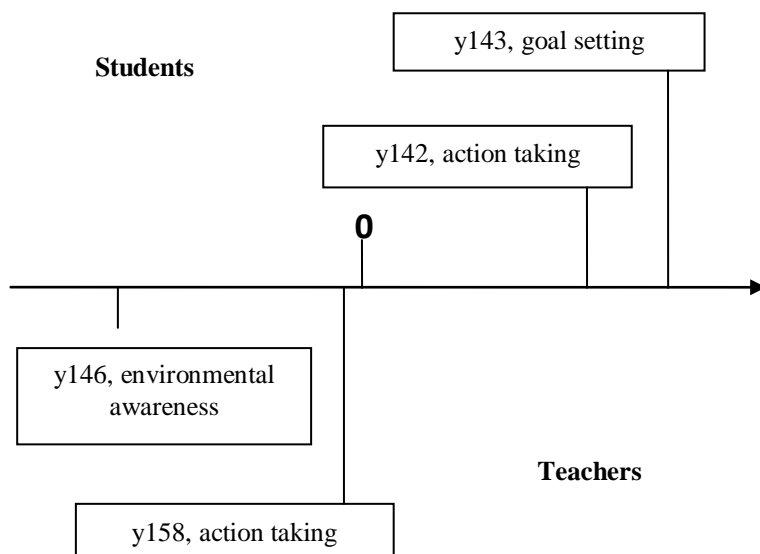

Figure 7-3: Development of other skills

Regarding the sixth axis of the research, i.e., students' (Fig. 7-4) and teachers' (Fig. 7-5) attitudes toward the project, as revealed in variable grouping explained in research methodology, both students and teachers have a positive attitude to it (98%), the former for acquiring knowledge and experience (44%), collaboration and communication (30%), and skill development (22%), the latter for knowledge and experience acquisition (32%), personal reasons (32%), such as changing students' attitudes to the educational process, students' skills development (12%), collaboration and communication (19%).

Their positive attitude explains, according to the respondents' answers, and especially to those of the teachers', their will to participate in a new project and reveals project diversification from mainstream school subjects as it offers an open field of study and connects school to society.

In particular, according to FAC (Fig. 7-4), students describe their participation as a fascinating and interesting experience (y254), and teachers as a positive experience (y240) for the reasons of project diversification from the textbook and the curriculum (y236), and learning and communication skill development for students (y250).
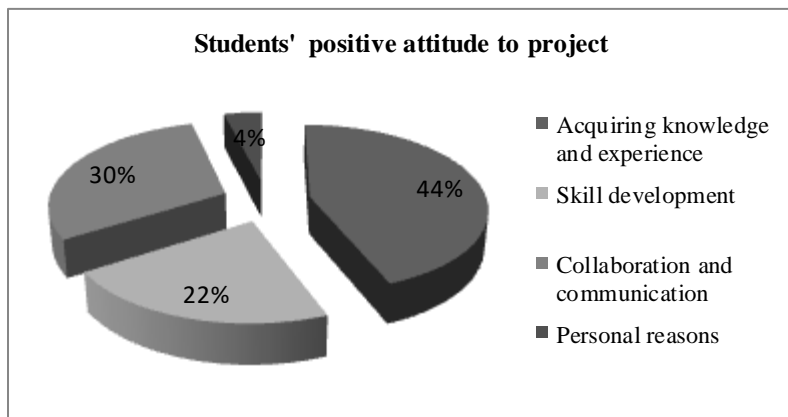

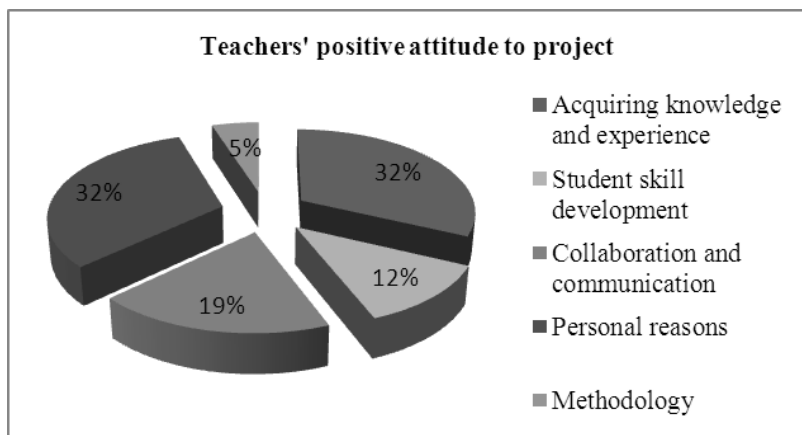Figure 7-4: Students' attitudes toward the project

Teachers' positive attitude to project

- ■ Acquiring knowledge and experience
- ■ Student skill development
- ■ Collaboration and communication
- ■ Personal reasons
- ■ Methodology

32% 5% 32% 12% 19%

Figure 7-5: Teachers' attitudes toward the project

Students

y254, a fascinating and interesting experience

0

y240, a positive experience

y250, learning and communication skill development

y236, diversification from the textbook and the curriculum
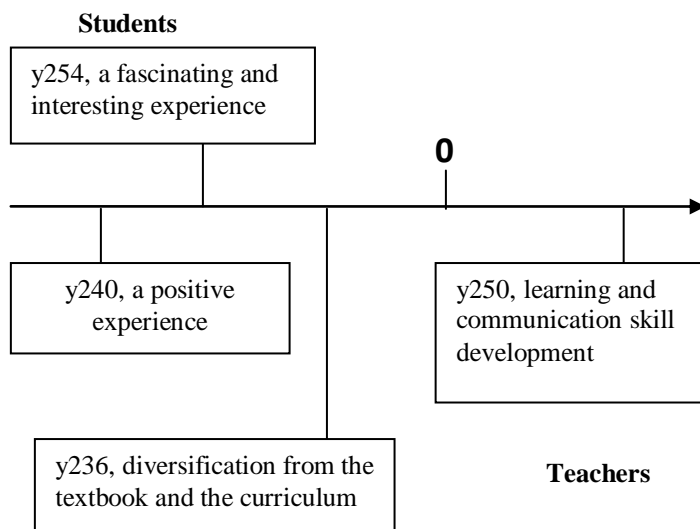
Teachers

Figure 7-6: Students' and teachers' attitudes toward the project (FAC)

Moreover, the majority of teachers (63%) stress the necessity of training (Fig.7-7) in designing and implementing a project, so that their students are motivated and actively involved (y298) and the project does not comprise a simple class activity (y276). It is also worth noting that, although it is recommended that one project in Senior High School should be done in English, which could further contribute to students' skill development, practice shows that very few projects are completely done in English.
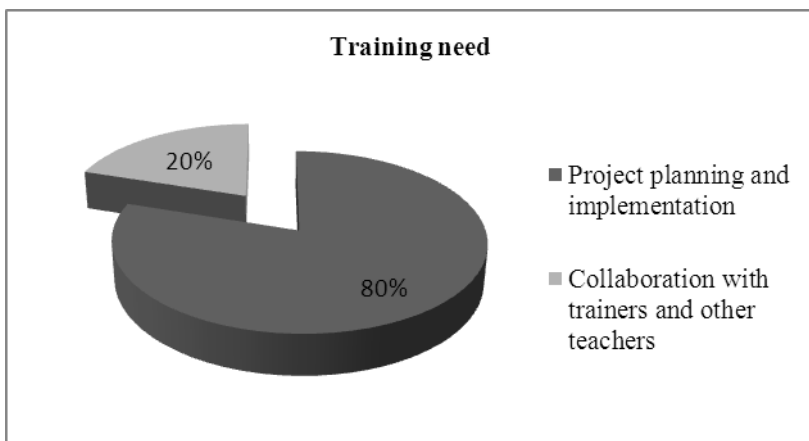

Figure 7-7: Teachers' need of training

In addition, feedback for the pilot implementation of projects in Senior High School in the school year 2011-2012 has raised, among other issues, insufficient teacher training, infrastructure and budget, and validity of research tools.

Teachers have an important role in project planning, group forming, coordination, student support while using ICT, finding partners, utilizing the final product, school opening to society and motivating students to participate in innovative programs, do research, collaborate and learn in an experiential way.

The results presented here about project contribution to skill development (according to the principles of the language policy at a global, European and Greek level) are on a par with other relevant researches on Innovative Programs (Παπαδοπούλου et al., 2008; Σπυροπούλου et al., 2008), which show that project implementation in these programs contributes to education upgrading, alternative methodology

of acquiring knowledge, and development of skills, values, behaviors and positive attitudes to learning.

4. Conclusion and further suggestions

As there was no previous relevant research, the aim of this study was to examine, in accordance with the principles of the foreign language curriculum and innovative programs in secondary education of the Greek educational system, both the contribution of the project to developing students' skills in general, and language skills in particular, and consequently learner autonomy, as perceived by the participants in the research, as well as students' and teachers' attitudes toward the project.

It is evident that language teaching is really significant in our globalized and multicultural society, and European programs can foster foreign language use as a means of intercultural communication and awareness between students from different countries. Moreover, language policy promotes project implementation as an important factor of the educational process.

The findings of the present study confirm the significance of the project in motivation, collaborative and experiential learning, communication, skill development, use of technology, knowledge acquisition, students autonomy and school connectivity to the community and everyday life. For these reasons, it can enhance collaboration between teachers of different disciplines, promote interdisciplinary and holistic knowledge, motivate students to take actions, and enhance intercultural approach and communication. Since both students and teachers are positive to project implementation, and teachers in particular are in need of further training and mentoring, a data basis of the best projects could help students and teachers share their work, publicize results and take ideas, while participation in competitions could enhance motivation, innovation and creativity. All these things demand teacher training, infrastructure and new learning communities. This is a call from the teachers participating in the research, who would like school advisors and school leaders take a more active role in their training and mentoring.

Finally, there is ground for future research, especially after the introduction of the project into the senior high school curriculum, and the design of a model on 21st century skills (Αλαχιώτης & Καρατζιά-Σταυλιώτη, 2009, pp. 296-300), by possible use of modern technological tools. As goal setting is a major part of project planning, development of certain skills should be set as one of the goals of the project. This would be particularly useful, since 21st century skills are not only considered

necessary for young people to enter the labor market, but also useful in their life, especially during the current economic crisis.

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