

## **Bridging the gap: Issues of transition and continuity from primary to secondary schools in Greece**

**Thomaï Alexiou and Marina Mattheoudakis**

*Aristotle University of Thessaloniki*

*thalexiou@enl.auth.gr and marmat@enl.auth.gr*

**Abstract:** Although Greek children's early start with foreign languages is considered an advantage, this seems to be lost in their transition to secondary school. Learners in their first year of secondary education are usually required to repeat work covered in previous years and as a result, they often lose interest in English classes within the state school. This paper aims: (a) to explore the problems related to the lack of continuity in foreign language education between the primary and secondary sector, and (b) to suggest a scheme of teaching and learning which will take into consideration the idiosyncrasies of the Greek educational context.

**Key words:** transition; (dis)continuity; repetition; mixed ability classes; Greece

### **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 traveling and working outside the borders of their country. According to Hunt, Barnes, Powell & Martin (2008), 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 in the agenda of most European countries and, to this aim, compulsory education in at least one foreign language was introduced at the early stages of state primary school. Actually after 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 in a foreign language is a compulsory subject even from the first grade of primary education (Eurydice 2005). 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. The assumption is that learners who start learning a foreign language at primary school and continue into secondary school will most probably have an advantage over those with no previous exposure to the language (Hill, Davies, Oldfield & Watson 1998).

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 2005). 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.

The expansion of English language teaching (henceforth ELT) in primary education, of course, does not in itself guarantee success in language learning (cf. Martin 2000). However, as Mitchell, Martin & Grenfell (1992) have pointed out, starting earlier can help learners to reach higher levels of achievement, as long as continuity and progression in secondary level are provided. 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, and more particularly, on the liaison between primary and secondary sector in foreign language learning.

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

- (a) describe the characteristics of the English as a Foreign Language (henceforth EFL) context in Greece as well as the current situation regarding foreign language education in both the primary and secondary sector;
- (b) explore the problems related to the lack of continuity and progression in foreign language education between the primary and secondary sector in Greece, and
- (c) suggest an incremental scheme of teaching and learning which will recognise the idiosyncrasies of the Greek educational context and will capitalise on the benefits of the early start by providing differentiation in the secondary sector.

## 2. The Greek EFL 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 part of the secondary school curriculum as early as 1836 (Dimaras 1973) and for several decades the foreign language taught was French. Over the years, various socio-economic and political factors brought about changes in foreign language tuition in Greece. The result was

- (a) the gradual substitution of English for French;
- (b) the introduction of foreign language instruction into Greek primary schools in 1987.

Initially, this was implemented for the last three years of primary education, with most schools offering English. 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 years of primary education. Thus, Greek children start learning English at the third grade of primary schools, when they are about 8 or 9 years old.

The syllabus for English as a foreign language is prescribed by the Pedagogic Institute. Young learners are expected to cover a series of three coursebooks<sup>1</sup> over the last three years 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, until very recently, English language teachers were provided with a long list of state-approved coursebooks – by both British and local publishers – and were required to choose a coursebook according to the linguistic and cognitive needs of their students. In 2009-10 a new series of textbooks written for secondary school students was launched by the Pedagogic Institute.

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

---

<sup>1</sup> Until very recently the textbooks used were *Fun Way* 1, 2, 3; in the school year 2009-10 these were replaced by a new series approved by the Pedagogic Institute.

2004) where generalist teachers are responsible for the teaching of English 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. As graduates were previously appointed only in the secondary sector, university courses used to place more emphasis on their language development and methodology training rather than their pedagogical education. Contrary to what would normally be expected, the introduction of ELT in primary education has had very little influence on the programme of studies of the relevant university departments; thus, even today, the pedagogical education of English language teachers seems to be neglected and quite limited.

An intriguing and challenging characteristic of the EFL education in Greece is that the vast majority of parents chooses to intensify young learners' foreign language education and is willing to pay for private tuition alongside state school instruction. As a result, there is a thriving private sector of foreign language institutes which provides 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<sup>2</sup>, 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 and has continued to increase until today as private language tuition seems to have become the norm rather than the exception (Mattheoudakis & Alexiou 2009). 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 (for a relevant discussion see Mattheoudakis & Nicolaidis 2005, Mattheoudakis & Alexiou 2009).

Of course, the length and quality of learners' exposure to English outside the state school system may vary, as it depends, among other things, on parents' socio-economic status (Mattheoudakis & Alexiou 2009). Due to several factors relating to students' tutorial schooling, e.g., differences in the age of entry, differences in contact hours, lack of standardisation in the services provided, and, of course, variability in the students' rate of learning, children's proficiency in English varies widely and by the end of their primary school education, several of them may be holders of two or three language certificates (e.g., KET, PET or even FCE<sup>3</sup>) (Mattheoudakis & Nicolaidis 2005).

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

The transition from primary to secondary education seems to be much more challenging in the Greek EFL context than in any other European country because of the continuously expanding ELT 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

---

<sup>2</sup> The average age of Greek learners sitting for B2 and C2 exams (according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) is 13-14 & 15-16, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> KET: Key English Test (A2), PET: Preliminary English Test (B1), FCE: First Certificate in English (B2).

supposed to gain in primary education thanks 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 may often choose to ignore the relatively proficient or advanced learners and focus instead on the language needs of the weaker ones. Consequently, learners in their first year of secondary education are taught what they have already learned and are often treated as absolute beginners. This actually means that instead of allowing learners to build on their previous achievements and knowledge, teachers choose to homogenise teaching and ignore the rich variety of learning experiences that learners have gained by the time they reach secondary school. The gap between stronger and weaker learners increases in secondary education as students feel the need to continue attending private language classes so as to further develop their foreign language knowledge and skills. As a result, 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, rhymes and playful activities. When in secondary school, teaching becomes more formal, assessment is 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 these 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. Early foreign language instruction**

The question of introducing a foreign language in the primary education is very closely related to the issue of early start in language learning. Europe has acknowledged the benefits of an early start and encouraged the introduction of at least one foreign language in primary schools. This decision was based on research findings related to early foreign language acquisition. In particular, 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 more intuitive grasp of L2 structures, are more attuned to the L2 phonological system (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, Barnes, Powell, Lindsay & Muijs 2005). Their social skills develop and they are confident, enthusiastic, with a natural curiosity for everything.

Nevertheless, research projects in Barcelona and Hungary cast doubt on the idea of taking young learners' success in language learning for granted. What those researchers observe is merely tendencies, meaning 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. Mitchell, Martin & Grenfell 1992; Marinova-Todd, Bradford Marshall & Snow 2000).

With respect to the Greek educational system, Greece tuned in 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 syllabus, the coursebooks and other teaching materials to be used in the two educational sectors, as well as the training of foreign language teachers in the respective sectors.

## **5. 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 problems of discontinuity experienced in the Greek EFL context. Several implications are expected to emerge and lead to useful recommendations.

Our assumptions are 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.

## **6. Method**

### *6.1 Participants*

The research was carried out in 2008 and data was collected from 50 Greek state school teachers of English. All of them were appointed in the secondary sector but many of them had previously worked briefly in the primary sector as well. 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.

### *6.2 Instruments*

The instrument used for the present study was a 34-item survey composed of 33 Likert-type questions and 1 open-ended question. In designing and constructing the questionnaire, general criteria proposed by Dörnyei (2003a) were taken into consideration. This type of questionnaire is practical, easier to complete, and more convenient for processing the results (Bell 1993; Dörnyei 2003b).

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 questions 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<sup>4</sup>, (d) the issue of private language institutes, (e) the teaching methods used in the EFL classroom in both primary and secondary schools,

---

<sup>4</sup> At the time of the survey, the new series of coursebooks had not been introduced yet; so our findings concern the *Funway* series.

and (f) suggestions relevant to the issue of learners' transition from primary to secondary school. The open-ended question required teachers to provide further insights on the issue of learners' transition. Teachers' views were expected to reveal their beliefs, opinions and expectations regarding English language teaching and learning in primary and secondary education.

## **7. Results**

A total of 50 questionnaires were analyzed. For practical reasons, in the presentation of the results, teachers' answers under the two categories of 'strongly agree' and 'agree' will be classified as 'agree'; similarly, the 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree' answers will be merged into one general category, namely, 'disagree'.

### *7.1 Quantitative data*

#### *A. Syllabus*

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 year of secondary school. Most teachers (46%) agreed that there are a lot of similarities in the syllabi of those two years while 26% disagreed. The second question asked teachers whether the transition in the syllabus between those two grades is successful. In their majority (56%), teachers believe that this is highly unsuccessful while only 22% of them indicated the opposite (see Appendix). To the question whether there is progress in the syllabus from the last grade of primary school to the first grade of secondary school, 58% of the respondents indicated that there is no actual progress and 16% believe that there is. To the question whether the syllabus of the coursebook at the first year of secondary school should follow that of the last year in primary school, 52% of the teachers disagreed while 36% of them agreed. Teachers' replies to this question are surprising and do not agree with their replies to the previous questions; however, teachers know that the level of the coursebook used in the final year 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 question whether there is continuity in the syllabus between primary and secondary school, 50% of the teachers indicated that there is a lack of continuity, while only 26% stated the opposite.

#### *B. Learners' motivation*

The second group of questions aimed to elicit teachers' views regarding learners' motivation. To the question whether learners' motivation is higher when they enter secondary school, 42% of the teachers indicated that indeed it is higher, while 32% of them 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. The next question aimed to elicit teachers' opinion on whether weaker learners actually benefit from the similarities in the syllabus at primary and secondary school. The majority of the respondents (56%) believe that learners do benefit from the repetition while 16% of the teachers disagreed. Similarly, most teachers (54%) indicated that stronger learners benefit from the richer linguistic input provided in secondary schools, as compared to that in primary schools. Such a view may also explain teachers' answer to the following question which required them to state whether learners lose interest in learning English when they enter secondary school. Most 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 therefore find their English classes quite challenging. Perhaps the

most exciting finding in this section is teachers' replies to the final question which aimed to elicit their view regarding the optimal age for starting English. The vast majority of the respondents (92%) reach consensus 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 questions elicited teachers' opinion about the prescribed coursebook used in the last grade of primary schools (*Fun Way 3*). The vast majority of teachers (90%) disagreed very strongly with the statement that this is more appealing than the commercially available coursebooks used in secondary school. With respect to its level of difficulty, teachers' views were divided: 42% stated that *Fun Way 3* is more difficult than the coursebook chosen at the first year 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 high school choose their own coursebook and therefore this is different from one school to another. It is expected that some coursebooks will be harder and others easier than *Fun Way 3*. To the question whether the coursebook at the first 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 felt that coursebooks at the first grade of secondary school do not provide continuity to the coursebook of the primary, while an overwhelming 70% of the respondents admitted that the coursebook they choose for their first graders in secondary school is of an elementary level – probably because those learners belong to different levels of proficiency. This may also explain the problem of continuity indicated by the teachers. Finally, 48% of the teachers stated that it is difficult to choose a suitable coursebook for learners of the first grade of secondary schools while 38% had a different opinion.

### *D. The private language institutes*

Teachers were also required to provide their views about learners' systematic attendance of 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 high school; about half of them (40%) indicated that the coursebook they chose for their first graders had already been done by some of them in the private language institute they attended. 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. Finally, 44% of the teachers agree that learners who attend private language classes are better learners because they have had more hours of English language instruction; 40% of the teachers are sceptical about it and 16% disagree.

### *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. Most teachers (62%) seem to be aware that there are important differences in the methodology of teaching English between the two sectors; 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 them thought that this is not true.

#### *F. Teachers' suggestions*

The final group of questions aimed to explore (a) teachers' suggestions regarding the problem of learners' transition from primary to secondary school and (b) their perceived needs in terms of resources. To the question whether it would be preferable to stream first graders in secondary school, the majority of the respondents (72%) indicated that this is necessary; only 14% of the teachers disagreed. Similarly, 72% of the teachers consider mixed levels of ability to be the greatest problem in secondary schools. The next item required teachers to state whether 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, 86% of the respondents agreed with it, 2% disagreed and 12% did not state an opinion. Similarly, an overwhelming 90% of the teachers expressed their wish to have a bank of materials including videotaped lessons from English language classes in secondary schools, and 96% wish to have access to a complementary folder with teaching techniques appropriate for secondary school learners.

#### *7.2 Qualitative data*

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) lack of continuity and repetition in the English language syllabus
- (c) learners' motivation in learning English within the state school system
- (d) mixed-ability learners in English language classes

#### *A. Transition*

The issue of transition between the primary and secondary sector was pinpointed by several respondents. Some of them stressed the need for continuity in the material covered in the two sectors and commented on the coursebooks currently used in primary schools:

"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 year of secondary school – of an elementary level".

Such a comment is particularly alarming and highlights the issue of discontinuity and repetition in foreign language teaching. Still another teacher points out that it is quite difficult for a secondary school teacher to know the syllabus taught in primary school:

"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".



Finally, one teacher thought that 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 ...”.

### *B. Lack of continuity and repetition*

This problem was pointed out and discussed by several of the respondents. 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”.

Continuity and exposure to rich and varied linguistic input are vital. Of course this problem is not found exclusively in Greece. 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” (Nikolov & Curtain 2000: 37). The kind, frequency and length of prior early language experience and input are considered the most important factors for the benefit of young language learners (ibid).

Clark and Trafford (1996 cited in Stables & Wikeley 1999) found that many pupils complained and felt frustrated because of repetitions in the syllabus covered. The issue of repetition and its relation to motivation is revisited in many countries. The British conclude that “syllabuses should aim for manageable progression without undue repetition” (Stables & Wikeley 1999: 28). All these problems notwithstanding, teachers’ feeling about the early start issue is that “...early language learning can’t but be a good thing” (a teacher’s comment in Bolster et al. 2004: 39).

### *C. Learners’ motivation*

Repetition of syllabus and of work previously covered is bound to lead to demotivated and uninterested language learners. As one teacher pointed out:

“The most important problem, in my opinion, is that students attend private language classes and lack intrinsic motivation to attend English lessons in the first grade of secondary school. The weak students in my class are probably as weak as in the private foreign language school. Attending an FCE class in the private school doesn’t necessarily mean that the student’s English is at the FCE 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”.

Most of the teachers agreed that learners’ mentality needs to change. One of them 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”.

#### *D. Mixed-ability classes*

The problem of mixed ability classes is mentioned by the majority of the teachers inquired. 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”.

### **8. Implications and concluding remarks**

The early introduction of foreign language instruction in the Greek primary school is intended to have a positive impact on young learners’ linguistic and cognitive development. However, 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.

It seems that the situation in Greece is more complex than in other European countries, mainly because of the thriving private sector of foreign language instruction, and although Greek learners usually attain high levels of proficiency in English, this is not necessarily an achievement of the state school education. The state school English language teacher is usually better qualified than their colleagues in the private language institute; yet, they often feel helpless as they do not have access to necessary information and resources. Most importantly, due to their learners’ ‘mentality’ and belief in the necessity of private language classes, they often feel rejected.

Cameron (2001:106) 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 the initiatives of meetings, forums, 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 of private language classes. Materials and syllabus should be properly sequenced but most importantly they should extend and build on learners’ varied knowledge. While an increasing number of very young learners start learning English outside the state school system, the syllabus and coursebooks in the primary sector remained surprisingly unchanged for almost two decades. The number of Greek students who sit an EFL exam (e.g., KET, PET or even FCE) upon completing their primary education is the highest in Europe; yet, those learners are required to start from scratch when they enter secondary education and very often are treated as absolute beginners. Such teaching approaches have dire consequences on learners’ motivation. It remains to be seen whether the new

coursebooks introduced this school year to primary and secondary schools have taken these issues into consideration.

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 one teacher proposed: "Books in high school 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".

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 advisors 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. 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.

## References

- Bell J. (1993). *Doing Your Research Project*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Oxford: Open University Press.
- Bialystok E. & K. Hakuta (1999). "Confounded Age: Linguistic and cognitive factors in age differences". In D. Birdsong (ed), *Second Language Acquisition and the Critical Period Hypothesis for Second Language Acquisition*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 161-181.
- Bolster A., C. Balandier-Brown & P. Rea-Dickins (2004). "Young learners of modern foreign languages and their transition to the secondary phase: A lost opportunity?". *Language Learning Journal* 30: 35-41.
- Boodhoo N. (2005). "Connecting Key stage 2 and Key 3 foreign language provision: Developing understanding for initial teacher education-case studies of current practice". In *Summary Report to TTTA V.2:1-5*
- < <http://www.trb.ac.uk/viewArticle.aspx?categoryId=14537&taggingType=4&contentId=11389> >
- Bruner J. S. (1975). "The ontogenesis of speech acts". *Journal of Child Language* 2: 1-40.
- Cameron L. (2001). *Teaching Languages to Young Learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cameron L. (2003). "Challenges for ELT from the expansion in teaching children". *ELT Journal* 57, 2:105-112.
- Dimaras A. (1973). *I Metarrythmisi pou den Egine* [The reform that did not take place]. Athens, Greece: Nea Ekdotiki Ermis.
- Dörnyei Z. (2003a). *Questionnaires in Second Language Research: Construction, Administration, and Processing*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Dörnyei Z. (2003b). "Attitudes, orientations, and motivations in language learning: advances in theory, research, and applications". *Language Learning* 53: 3-32.
- Eurydice (2005). "Key data on teaching languages at school in Europe". European Commission Directorate General for Education and Culture.
- < <http://www.eurydice.org/portal/page/portal/Eurydice/PubContents?pubid=049EN> >
- Hill K., A. Davies, J. Oldfield & N. Watson (1998). "Questioning an early start: the transition from primary to secondary foreign language learning". *Melbourne Papers in Language Testing* 62: 21-36.

- Hunt M., A. Barnes, B. Powell, G. Lindsay & D. Muijs (2005). "Primary modern foreign languages: An overview of recent research, key issues and challenges for educational policy and practice". *Research Papers in Education* 20, 4: 371-390.
- Hunt M., A. Barnes, B. Powell & C. Martin (2008). "Moving on: The challenges for foreign language learning on transition from primary to secondary school". *Teaching and Teacher Education* 24: 915-926.
- Lenneberg E. (1967). *Biological Foundations of Language*. New York: Wiley & Son.
- Marinova-Todd S.H., D. Bradford Marshall & C.E. Snow (2000). "Three misconceptions about age and L2 learning". *TESOL Quarterly* 34, 1: 9-34.
- Martin C. (2000). *An Analysis of National and International Research on the Provision of Modern Foreign Languages in Primary Schools*. London: QCA.
- Mattheoudakis M. & T. Alexiou (2009). "Early foreign language instruction in Greece: socioeconomic factors and their effect on young learners' language development". In M. Nikolov (ed), *Contextualising the Age Factor*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 227-251.
- Mattheoudakis M. & K. Nicolaidis (2005). "Stirring the waters: university INSET in Greece". *European Journal of Teacher Education* 28, 1: 49-66.
- Mitchell R., C. Martin & M. Grenfell (1992). *Evaluation of the Basingstoke Primary Schools Language Awareness Project 1990/91*. University of Southampton: Centre for Language in Education Occasional Paper 7.
- Nikolov M. & H. Curtain (2000). *An Early Start: Young Learners and Modern Languages in Europe and Beyond*. Graz, Austria: Council of Europe.
- Piaget J. (1975). *The child's conception of the world*. Totowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams. (Originally published 1932).
- Stables A. & F. Wikeley (1999). "From bad to worse? Pupils' attitudes to modern foreign languages at ages 14 and 15". *Language Learning Journal* 20: 27-31.
- Vygotsky L.S. (1978). *Mind and Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

## Appendix

Table 1. Teachers' answers to the questionnaire<sup>5</sup>

	<i>Strongly disagree or disagree</i>	<i>Neither agree nor disagree</i>	<i>Strongly agree or agree</i>
<i>A. Syllabus</i>			
There is successful transition between primary and secondary syllabus	56%	22%	22%
There is no actual progress in the syllabus from primary to secondary level	16%	26%	58%
There is total lack of continuity between primary and secondary school	26%	24%	50%
<i>B. Learners' motivation</i>			
Learners should start English in secondary school	92%	2%	6%
Learners' motivation in secondary school is lower because of repetition	24%	24%	48% *
<i>C. The coursebook</i>			
The coursebook in secondary school is elementary level	10%	18%	70% *
<i>D. Private language institutes</i>			
The majority of learners attend private language classes	6%	4%	90%
<i>E. Methodology</i>			
There are no differences in the methodology of teaching English between primary and secondary state schools in Greece	62%	24%	14%
<i>F. Teachers' suggestions</i>			
Streaming learners when they enter secondary school is necessary	14%	14%	72%
Visiting and observing English language classes in primary schools would help secondary school teachers	2%	16%	80% *
A record compiled by the primary English language teacher, with information about English language work would be useful	2%	12%	86%
The greatest problem in secondary schools is learners' mixed levels of ability	12%	16%	72%
A 'bank of materials' including videotaped lessons from English language teaching would help	2%	8%	90%
A complementary folder with techniques appropriate to secondary school students would be useful	4%	0%	96%

\* The remaining percentage of teachers did not indicate their answers to those questions.

<sup>5</sup> Due to space limitations, only a selection of the findings is recorded on the table.