Greek state-school teachers' educational priorities: a preliminary review

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Abstract: The paper reviews the major priorities in the domain of in-service ESOL teacher education and training in Greece. State-school teachers currently beginning their postgraduate studies at the Hellenic Open University were asked to rate their perceptions about issues that are "traditionally" considered of central concern (e.g., teaching methodology, class management, language skills instruction, learner assessment) and issues that are "non-traditional" (e.g., English as a Lingua Franca, intercultural competence, the native/non-native speaker dichotomy, the use of technology in teaching, etc). The paper provides a critical understanding of these issues with reference to a number of parameters and concludes by discussing implications for academically-oriented teacher education programmes.
Key words: in-service teacher education, teachers' beliefs, teachers' needs

1. Introduction

In education psychology, teacher beliefs are defined as "unconsciously held assumptions about students, classrooms, and the academic material to be taught" (Kagan 1992: 65). Researching teachers' beliefs is important to the extent that these beliefs can (a) influence teachers' perception and judgment, (b) provide information about how teaching is actually enacted in the language teaching classroom, and (c) inform teacher education programmes on responding to teachers' expressed needs (Johnson 1994).

For many years, research on teachers' beliefs have been a major source of information on a wide variety of issues, from analyzing the influence on learners' motivation and de-motivation (Hufton *et al*, 2003; Peacock, 1998), to estimating the ways in which teachers value established methodologies (Tan, 2005) and different assessment practices (James & Pedder, 2006), to appraising the impact of language policy on different settings (e.g., Farrell & Tan Kiat Kun, 2007; Sifakis & Sougari, 2003; Stritikus, 2003). Teachers' beliefs can help us form a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of key elements in their professional life, such as the notion of achievement (Georgiou, 2008) and continuous development (Lamb, 1993). What is more, pre-service teachers tend to hold differing beliefs than their in-service colleagues (Peacock, 2001), and the beliefs, attitudes, expectations and realization of reality (generic and specific) of experienced teachers about different aspects of teaching and learning are not likely to be identical to those of their less experienced colleagues (Furlong & Maynard, 1995).

In the past, a wide variety of research methodologies have been adopted in researching teacher's beliefs, ranging from the implementation of visualization activities and metaphors aiming to elicit personal theories of teaching and learning (Roberts, 1998: 310-11), engaging teachers in structured interviews and cooperative discussions (Edge, 1991), asking them to fill in repertory grids (Donaghue, 2003) or respond to questionnaires (e.g., Doff, 1988). All such research instruments aim at eliciting teachers' true perceptions about the issues raised and overcoming obstacles that may

arise from the unconscious nature of personal theories about teaching and learning, the often unconscious (and rather natural) tendency of many teachers to promote a particular self-image, or the mismatch between espoused theory (as claimed by participants) and actual teaching practice.

This paper focuses on gathering Greek state-school teachers' perceptions about their continuous education and training priorities. In-service teachers at the beginning of their post-graduate studies were asked to respond to a questionnaire and rate a series of seven broad domains according to their own needs and priorities. In addition, they were asked to prioritise individual sub-categories within each of these domains. The domains ranged from typical, or "traditional" training orientations, such as teaching methodology, classroom management and language skills instruction, to less typical (and, from this perspective "non-traditional") concerns of current research in foreign language pedagogy, such as alternative assessment, English as a Lingua Franca and the teaching of intercultural competence.

2. Research methodology

The questionnaire was administered electronically to 100 students in the first year of their M.A. in TESOL studies at the Hellenic Open University. The programme adopts the distance learning methodology and involves students from all over Greece. In order to be accepted, students should have a university degree in English language studies recognized by the state and a minimum of 3 years of teaching experience. A total of 55 valid questionnaires were collected within the specified deadline. 91% of the respondents were female and 9% male. 51.9% belonged to the 25-30 age group, whereas the rest were distributed as follows: 27.8% (31-35 years), 5.6% (36-40) and 14.8% (41+).

In terms of teaching experience, the great majority fell in the 4-8 year mark (66%), with 11.4% claiming to have 9-13 years of experience, another 11.4% claiming to have 15-18 years and the remainder 5.7% having 20-23 years of experience. Finally, as regards their current affiliation, 40.7% claimed to teach in the state secondary sector, 27.8% in the state primary sector, whereas 14.8% claimed to teach in private primary and secondary schools, 5.6% taught exam-preparation classes privately and 11.1% either taught in the tertiary sector or claimed unaffiliated at the moment of the research.

The questionnaire (see Appendix A) asked respondents to rate their preferences in terms of seven broad domains of training in which they consider to be in need of further education and training. These domains were presented as follows:

a. The teaching of language-specific issues, such as teaching grammar, vocabulary, etc.
b. The teaching of intercultural competence (using English in communication with other non-native users).
c. Teaching of global English / English as a Lingua Franca (ELF).
d. Student assessment and testing.
e. Course and syllabus design.
f. Classroom management issues.
g. Integrating educational technology in the EFL classroom.

In addition, respondents were asked to provide further details by rating their education/training priorities within each of these seven categories. The descriptive and inferential statistics were computed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

3. Findings

Table 1 presents the statistical results of our respondents' prioritizing of the seven broad categories mentioned above.

Table 1. Teachers' overall education/training preferences (in percentages)

Ranking	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th
a. language-specific issues	9.6	5.8	9.6	5.8	9.6	13.5	46.2
b. intercultural competence	18.5	14.8	13	13	11.1	22.2	7.4
c. global English / ELF	13.2	13.2	13.2	9.4	15.1	17	18.9
d. assessment and testing	-	15.1	17	22.6	22.6	20.8	1.9
e. course/syllabus design	20.4	11.1	24.1	22.2	14.8	5.6	1.9
f. classroom management	20.8	11.3	13.2	15.1	15.1	11.3	13.2
g. educational technology	21.8	30.9	12.7	10.9	9.1	9.1	5.5

Of all the areas mentioned in the questionnaire, educational technology is by far considered the most important of all, in terms of respondents' preferred educational/training priorities. It is the first choice of a fifth and the second choice of nearly a third of the respondents. It should also be pointed out that it is favoured as a first or second choice by all age groups. When asked more specifically about their training needs with regard to certain types of educational technology, more than 64% identify the Internet as their top or top-but-one priority, whereas 55% believe to be in need of further training in the implementation of appropriate educational computer software (first and second priority). Game platforms also feature high, with 25% of our respondents selecting them as their top educational priority and another 25% as a second and third priority. 56% or the teachers rated video-related training as their third and fourth priorities and 42.3% rated email as fifth and sixth priority, with only 2.2% selecting it as their topmost priority. At the same time, word processing skills were considered a top priority by 11.4%, but this option features low in the broader priority list (nearly 48% rate it as a fourth and fifth choice).

The second most popular choice overall is the area of course and syllabus design, which is evenly positioned as a first, third and fourth priority. This choice was a "hit" with the youngest group (25-30), which can be accounted for by the lack of extensive teaching experience that is characteristic of that group. More particularly, the teachers who participated in this survey wanted to find out more about creating their own teaching materials (top priority for 75%), whereas 31.2% of them consider the ability to select appropriate coursebooks and adapt existing materials a top priority (second choice for 78.4%).

In the third and fourth positions we see classroom management and the teaching of intercultural competence. The former is selected as first choice by a fifth of respondents and it appears to be much more popular with the younger groups (25-35), much more so

with the 25-30 group. In particular, dealing with mixed-ability classes was especially important for the 25-35 age-groups (first and second choice for 76.3% of respondents). The same was the case with mixed-proficiency classes, which were quite popular with all age-groups (first and second choice for 53% of respondents). Dealing with multicultural classes was also a popular choice (first and second choice for 51.9% of respondents), especially with the younger generation of teachers. Reinforcing discipline was a popular third choice (34.6%), which might be a reflection of teachers' conviction that either discipline is not a major issue in state schools or discipline issues are not a major priority of formal academic training. Finally, dealing with large classes was a popular third and fourth choice (58.8%), and more popular with the 31-45 age-groups.

The Global English/ELF option has a marked preference in the first three priorities, but it largely features in the last three places. Our respondents prioritized a need to find out more about ways of using English as a means of understanding native and non-native speaking cultures alike (first and second choice for an astounding 82.7% of respondents), with 76.5% subscribing to the notion of English as an international medium of communication that involves native and non-native speakers without discrimination. In fact, the more "traditional" perceptions of learning English for communication with native speakers are a popular third and fourth choice (82.6%). This option is more popular with younger teachers (25-35), which comes as no surprise, as they are more likely to be more aware of and more concerned about the increasing global role of English in popular social interaction domains such as the Internet.

The need to expand on their expertise regarding teaching English as communication is evident from our respondents' prioritization of their needs regarding the teaching of language-specific issues. This option ranks very low in teachers' priorities, in fact nearly half of our respondents place them at the very bottom of their list, whereas 13.5% place it in 6th place. By far the most popular domain (first choice by 47.2%) is the teaching of pragmatics, an area that bridges the language-specific and communication-specific fields. This is followed by the so-called "productive" skills, speaking and writing, which are a popular second and third choice for 54.2% and 36% of respondents respectively. Such a preference confirms the oft-quoted role of teachers as active feedback providers to learners' linguistic output. Listening and reading are a popular fourth and fifth priority for most participants in our survey (26.5% and 40.4% respectively), whereas teaching vocabulary and grammar as separate modules comes at the bottom of teachers' educational priorities: vocabulary is a sixth choice for 43.8% and grammar is a seventh choice for 59.6%.

Finally, it is surprising that the assessment and testing option collected no first preferences. In fact, two thirds of our respondents rate it as a fourth, fifth and sixth priority. One possible explanation for that may be that, in the broader Greek ELT mentality, assessment and testing is associated with high-stakes examinations. These examinations are typically identified as the "responsibility" of private institutions and not the state sector, which is the affiliation of nearly 70% of our HOU students who participated in this survey. It is interesting to note, however, that this option is higher in the agenda of older generations of our respondents (in the 31-45 age group) and much less so with the 25-35 group.

4. Discussion
When we consider the above findings with reference to the "traditional/non-traditional" orientation of training needs, this rather arbitrary distinction can in fact help us draw some useful observations about Greek state school teachers' teaching reality, needs and priorities. As already mentioned, the integration of educational technology in the EFL

classroom is the most significant priority of most of the teachers surveyed. The "traditional/non-traditional" distinction seems to be particularly helpful here, because it can help us understand and possibly explain teachers' preferences. For example, it could be argued that, with the exception of the Internet, technological modes that enjoy broad and extensive usage in the last few years are not amongst teachers' top priorities. This is the case with word processors, video and email. This can be attributed to teachers' increased familiarity with these technologies as frequent modes of communication. It must be pointed out here, however, that, despite the widespread use of email and word processors, it is not necessarily the case that teachers are fully aware of the many different ways in which these modes can be used as teaching tools (Maybin & Swann, 2006). The same is the case with video, which is still used very extensively online, but teachers may identify the notion with the outdated video-players of the 1980s.

A notable exception to the above claim is the Internet. Its ubiquity and permeability can account for its great popularity as the first choice in teachers' priority list. It is obvious that what teachers see in the Internet is an enormous capability in bringing people together for various purposes and doing it in ways that are always interesting and often surprising. On the other hand, teachers' preferences regarding computer software and game platforms for educational purposes reflect teachers' realization of the capability of these modes as resources of potentially authentic and motivating activities for their learners at virtually all levels and for all purposes (cf. Hubbard, 2009).

The high ranking of the course and syllabus design option can be related to the responsibilities state-school ELT teachers have in selecting the appropriate textbooks[1] and laying out the day-to-day progress of the lessons. This pragmatic need can also account for the popularity of this domain with the younger and less experienced teachers.

Classroom management issues were, as we saw, among the top three educational and training priorities for the teachers involved. Again, in this option we see teachers' prioritizing the more pragmatic (and therefore more "traditional") concerns of the day-to-day handling of their lessons, namely, dealing with mixed-ability and mixed-proficiency groups of learners. This can be once again related to the teaching experience of our respondents. It can also be related to the nature of most state-school ELT classes, which usually occupy many learners and are often described as mixed-ability (Sifakis & Sougari, 2005). Interestingly, intercultural competence is first priority for nearly a fifth of our teachers, but it also features as a sixth priority for more than another fifth of them as well. This option was popular with all but the oldest groups of teachers, and is evidence of teachers' pragmatism and awareness of the changing cultural character of Greek state schools (Damanakis, 2005).

As concerns teachers' preferences regarding the teaching of Global English/ELF, our research shows that teachers appear to slowly but steadily move away from the traditional native speaker model for which they were more than adequately prepared as undergraduates. That model is still strong, but the awareness of the possibility of a "blended" model that involves non-native speakers as equally legitimate stakeholders (cf. Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2005) appears as a potentially valid candidate. Clearly, teachers seem to welcome this "non-traditional" model as a crucial part of their basic training. This is corroborated by our respondents' acknowledgement of the ubiquitous multicultural character of English and its importance as a global language, one that encompasses elements of the inner, outer and expanding circles (first choice for 61.2%).

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[1] It is important to mention that the questionnaire was administered before the implementation of specific textbooks (designed under the auspices of the Pedagogical Institute) in certain levels of the primary and lower-secondary levels.

Teachers' low ranking of language-specific issues imply that they are either very confident in the teaching of language-specific issues (i.e., that they "know it all" already), or feel that their postgraduate training should focus on other issues, ones that did not engage them as undergraduate students. This is probably because teachers believe that they already have a firm grounding in the linguistics of English from their university studies; therefore they do not consider this area to be of high priority. Another reason might be related to the way respondents see themselves professionally. It is natural for EFL teachers to consider their job to be the teaching of "the language"; therefore it would be surprising if they acknowledged that they need further training in how to do just that (Sifakis, 2009). This is especially important if we consider that all of our respondents are in-service teachers, some of them with significant teaching experience. Interestingly, this option seems to be more popular with youngest teachers (25-30), probably due to their lack of confidence and teaching experience. With that in mind, it would be interesting to further research the level and quality of actual usage of English by our respondents, both inside and outside of the English classroom.

As we saw earlier, assessment is one of the least favourable educational and training areas for our participants. This is probably because, in Greece, assessment is frequently associated with testing and testing is often equated with high-stakes proficiency examinations, which, in this country, are typically seen to be the "responsibility" of private institutions (frontisteria, tutors, etc), not the state sector. This conviction is often extended to teacher training, which is also very often seen to be the "job" of private institutions, or large international examination bodies. That conviction aside, the importance of alternative assessment is celebrated as a top priority by 72% of our respondents, with 58.3% selecting the improvement of own skills in carrying out in-house tests as a second option and 72.9 % selecting the preparation of standardized exams as a third option. Despite the overall low priority of assessment as a training need in this survey, the primacy of alternative assessment confirms the importance of this type of assessment (see, for example, van der Schaaf *et al*, 2008).

5. Conclusion

The survey described in this paper has attempted to research state-school EFL teachers' training priorities and interpret them with reference to a "traditional/non-traditional" orientation of those priorities. As we have seen, teachers acknowledge the central role of educational technology. What is more, the domains typically associated with the "linguistics" component of a university degree (such as grammar, vocabulary, English as a native speaker language, etc) are not high in teachers' priority lists. On the other hand, the domains that are closer to an on-going and communication-oriented perception of language are higher in their preferences; in this sense, there is a marked preference for appreciating the global function of the language (incorporating native and non-native speaker contexts). Similarly, the fact that our in-service teachers want to find out more about course and syllabus design and the creation, adaptation and implementation of teaching materials and dealing with the increasing multicultural character of their classes should also instruct decision-makers involved with the orientation of ESOL-related university degrees, especially in Greek state universities, which are not necessarily aimed at preparing English language teachers but in providing an all-round education in "English studies" (also see Sifakis, 2009).

Researching in-service teachers' perceived priorities can shed light on their awareness of language policy and its implementation in their context – more importantly, their beliefs can form a kind of indirect critique of these policies (in this regard, see Silver & Skujia-Steele, 2005). They can also facilitate and even enable

curriculum innovation in ways that respond to the specifics and idiosyncracies of each teaching situation, most importantly, teachers' and learners' own needs (cf. Waters & Vilches, 2001). They can further improve the quality of teacher education with an aim to ensuring sustainable quality outcomes (White, 1998).

As teachers are major stakeholders in their English language teaching contexts, it is important to see what their perceived priorities are – it would be useful to see how their corresponding practices can be coupled with these beliefs.

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APPENDIX A
<u>Teacher Questionnaire</u>

In your own view, in which of the following areas do you need extra training? Please read the rows and number your preferences, starting from 1.

General areas of training
- The teaching of language-specific issues, such as teaching grammar, vocabulary, etc.
- The teaching of intercultural competence (using English in communication with other non-native users)
- The teaching of global English / English as a lingua franca
- Student assessment and testing
- Course and syllabus design
- Classroom management issues
- Integrating educational technology in the EFL classroom

In what follows, please number the areas where you believe you need extra training (starting each time from 1).

The teaching of language-specific issues
- Teaching grammar
- Teaching vocabulary
- Teaching listening
- Teaching speaking
- Teaching reading
- Teaching writing
- Teaching pragmatics

Classroom management issues
- The handling of multicultural classes
- The handling of mixed-ability classes
- Reinforcing discipline in the classroom
- The handling of large classes
- The handling of classes with students of mixed proficiency levels

The teaching of intercultural competence
- Using English in communicating *mainly* with *non-native* users
- Using English in communicating *mainly* with *native* users
- Using English in communicating with *native and non-native* users *alike*
- Using English as a means of *understanding other cultures (native or non-native)*

The teaching of global English—teaching the English of people who were brought up in places like:
- England, Ireland, USA, Canada or Australia
- South Africa, the Caribbean, India, Pakistan, Singapore, Kenya, Nigeria
- European Union, China, Japan
- All the above without exception or preference

Student assessment and testing
- Preparing learners for certain standardized proficiency examinations (e.g., Cambridge First Certificate, Cambridge Proficiency, etc)
- Improving my own skills in carrying out regular in-house tests
- Understanding and using alternative assessment (portfolios, etc)

Integrating educational technology in the EFL classroom
- Using computer software (CD-ROM material)
- Using the Internet
- Using game platforms (e.g., PlayStation, PSP, etc)
- Using video
- Using email
- Using word processors
- Other (please specify):

Course and syllabus design
- Creating original teaching material
- Adapting already existing teaching material
- Selecting appropriate coursebooks

- In which of the following domains do you *currently* teach? Please tick as appropriate.
  ☐ Primary school   ☐ Lower secondary school   ☐ Senior secondary school
  ☐ Tertiary institution ☐ Private frontistirio   ☐ Private lessons
  ☐ Other (please specify): _____

- Years of teaching experience (total):

- In which age group do you belong? Please tick as appropriate:
  ☐ 25-30   ☐ 31-35   ☐ 36-40   ☐ 41-45   ☐ 46-50   ☐ 51-55   ☐ 56-60   ☐ 60+

Please save this copy in your PC and then email it as an attachment to sifakis@eap.gr.
Many sincere thanks for your time and cooperation!