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Teaching linguistically diverse classes: The impact of teachers' prior educational experiences

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Abstract

One of the main aims of pre-service or in-service teacher education is to develop educators who are aware of their own educational backgrounds and critically reflect on those experiences for future practice. The present qualitative study attempts to explore how the educational and linguistic biographies of ten educators of linguistically diverse classes in Greece impact their beliefs and educational practices. The focal educators were postgraduate students attending a module on multilingualism and language education, in the context of which they wrote a reflective essay on their own second language learning experiences. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted, aiming to explore their reflections on their own educational backgrounds and their perception on how this background had defined their teaching philosophies and practices. The essays and the interviews were analyzed through the content analysis method. The results revealed that teachers mainly held negative experiences while positive models were rare. They acknowledged having been influenced by what they had experienced as students, especially at the beginning of their careers. However, the reflective process helped them redefine the appropriateness of their teaching methods and their attitudes towards their bilingual students, as their plurilingual educational experiences were examined under a new light. The article concludes with the implications of the study with regard to teacher preparation programs.

Keywords
Apprenticeship of observation, Greek as L2, teachers' beliefs, L2 learning experiences.

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Introduction

Beliefs about second language acquisition have been broadly defined by Kalaja and Barcelos (2003, p. 1) "as opinions and ideas that learners and teachers have about the task of learning a second/foreign language". Beliefs are dynamic, socially constructed, and experience based (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2003), while they have been found to influence teachers' decisions and educational practices (Pajares, 1992; Woods, 1996). A significant factor shaping teachers' beliefs is their own learning experiences, known as the "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 1975; M. Borg, 2004). Before entering their professional field, teachers have the opportunity to observe their future colleagues in action for a long period of time. This partial exposure to the educational procedure may be the source of ready-made strategies, conceptions about the learning process itself and opinions on what works and what does not work. However, these were formed before acquiring a pedagogical framework that would allow them to analyze and evaluate them. On the other hand, in the field of language teaching it has been shown that teachers' multilingualism, and their own language learning experiences can be a valuable resource, contributing positively to their conceptions about language and language teaching (Ellis, 2004, 2006, 2016).

In this context and taking into account that teachers' learning experiences derive from various educational settings, it needs to be investigated how the apprenticeship of observation influences teachers' beliefs and perceived practices in linguistically diverse classes. Instructors need to decide how to respond pedagogically to linguistically diverse classes in terms of how to teach and manage their classes, and how to apply assessment policies and criteria to their students' work. The study presented in this paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of this issue by focusing on the impact teachers' learning experiences and particularly their second language (L2) learning background has on their cognition. We probed into the Greek context, and we focused on ten teachers, who were currently teaching classes hosting bilingual students learning Greek as a L2. These teachers, who attended a course on "Multilingualism and Language Education" (Postgraduate Program "Current Trends in Linguistics for Educators", Hellenic Open University) wrote an autobiographical reflective essay, followed by an interview. The main aim of the interviews was to focus on whether their personal experiences as students had influenced their current teaching approaches and techniques as well as to what extent the reflective essay has influenced their teaching

methods and their attitudes towards their bilingual students. On the whole, the present study explores (1) teachers' perceptions of their experience writing the reflective essay, (2) teachers' views as to whether and to what extent their personal educational experiences have influenced their current teaching practices and (3) whether and how the reflective process has made them review the appropriateness of their teaching methods and their attitudes towards students who learn Greek as a L2.

Theoretical background

The "apprenticeship of observation"

According to Simon Borg (2019), teacher cognition is "an umbrella term for the unseen dimensions of teachers' work" (p. 1152). It refers to what teachers think, know, and believe about their work. A factor affecting teacher cognition about learning and teaching is their own experiences as learners (S. Borg, 2003). As Lortie (1975, p. 61) noted, by the time young people graduate from high school, they have observed teachers at work for far more hours than any other occupational group. He coined the term "apprenticeship of observation" to describe this. During this period, certain conceptions are created about what teachers do and how they do it. However, as Lortie himself observed, these conceptions are limited in scope, since students become the audience of what takes place on stage without observing backstage actions and decisions, and the underlying educational rationale. These past experiences are used as models for imitation by prospective and novice teachers, ready-made recipes for planning and action, affecting, thus, the efficacy of teacher preparation programs (Grossman, 1991; Holt-Reynolds, 1992). As a result, the apprenticeship of observation has been thought as a conservative force in education, enabling traditional, teacher-centered approaches to survive from generation to generation (M. Borg, 2004; Kennedy, 1991; Lortie, 1975).

However, the conservative nature of the apprenticeship of observation has been faced with skepticism. Smagorinsky and Barnes (2014), building on the work by Mewborn and Tyminski (2006), suggested that the concept should be revisited and revised as people have both positive and negative educational experiences, the impact of which on teachers' beliefs needs to be taken into account in teacher training programs. They argue that the relevant literature "overemphasized the inclination toward conservative influences" (p. 49), as the first relevant studies were conducted in an era when more traditional forces were at work in education. In their research, they were

able to identify points of disruption in the transmission of traditional approaches to teaching as the student-teachers challenged their past experiences.

In the field of second language teaching and bilingual education, the apprenticeship of observation has also been shown to have a strong impact on teachers' beliefs. What is more, the student teachers' beliefs about language learning tend to be resistant to change under the influence of teacher education courses (Almarza, 1996; Peacock, 2001). More specifically, Simon Borg (2003) in a review article on teacher cognition noted that teachers approached several aspects of the educational procedure, such as the teaching approach followed, the integration of culture in the course, the use of metalanguage, and error correction, on the basis of their personal experiences. The teachers in the reviewed studies based their decisions to promote or avoid certain teaching strategies on their own positive or negative experiences as learners. Moodie (2016) introduced the term "anti-apprenticeship of observation" to describe how negative student experiences, i.e. teacher-centeredness and negative class atmosphere, fueled teachers' intentions to be different from their teaching models. However, he found that aspiring to be different from their models did not necessarily lead teachers to implement student-centered communicative activities, a fact suggesting that teacher education needs to be reformed to include reflective practice and firsthand experiences that could broaden teachers' pedagogical repertoire.

Past learning experiences with an impact on teachers' conceptions have been claimed to include not only the language the teachers teach - in the case of non-native language teachers -, but any language learning experience in a formal setting. Multilingual teachers demonstrate language awareness and a rich understanding of language learning to a degree greater than monolingual teachers (Ellis, 2004, 2006). In contrast to their monolingual colleagues, multilingual teachers embrace learning and communicative strategies that have worked for them as learners and show empathy to their students by presenting themselves as learners (Ellis, 2013). Ellis (2016) argues that language education research and professional development has insufficiently delved into the teachers' language identities as a factor informing their teaching practice. Recognizing and celebrating the plurilingual competences of teachers is, according to her, a key into obtaining a plurilingual approach to language pedagogy.

Reflection in teacher training and teaching practice

According to Rodgers (2002), "reflection is [...] a tool or vehicle used in the transformation of raw experience into meaning-filled theory that is grounded in experience, informed by existing theory" (p. 863). It is a key factor in the effort to challenge teachers' beliefs and practices and to nurture their critical thinking and critical action (Rogers, 2001). It provides opportunities for teachers to critically examine their daily practice, identify formative influences such as training and personal histories, seek the advice of colleagues and mentors, and draw upon relevant research to deepen their understanding and adapt their teaching practices to their newly developed understandings (Rodgers, 2002; Farrell, 2007).

Reflective writing in particular has a long tradition in teacher education. Simon Borg (2006) distinguishes between four types of reflective writing: journals, autobiography, retrospective accounts and concept maps. Autobiographical reflection has been used in a number of studies examining the impact of the apprenticeship of observation (e.g. Bailey et al, 1996; Boyd 2013; Miller & Shifflet, 2016). Results show that it can be a powerful tool in the hands of teacher educators to raise awareness among student teachers about the origins of their belief system and to encourage them to recall and critically examine their memories as students. With regard to the plurilingual identities of teachers, it is through reflective activities of this type that they are made explicit, are scrutinized and their pedagogical applications are explored (Ellis, 2016; Pavlenko, 2003).

However, reflective writing in an academic context is a challenging task (Rodgers, 2002; Ryan 2011), and, without adequate pedagogical guidance, student-teachers' engagement with the task has been shown to be superficial (McIntosh, 2010; Dyment & O'Connell, 2011). Ryan (2011), following Bruce (2008), has suggested that authors of reflective pieces of writing employ a variety of text types, i.e. recount, description, explanation and discussion, each of which involves certain conventions in terms of rhetorical structure and language characteristics. With regard to the content, there are two components in any type of reflection: "(1) making sense of experience in relation to self, others and contextual conditions; and importantly, (2) reimagining and/or planning future experience for personal and social benefit" (Ryan, 2012, p. 145). These two aspects of reflective writing are analyzed in the context of the current study.

Context and aim of the study

This study aimed to examine teachers' views on the role past learning experiences play in their beliefs and professional practices with regard to their bilingual students. We focused on the Greek context and teachers at primary schools as well as Greek language and literature teachers at secondary public schools. Since 1990, there have been large-scale migration flows into Greece from different countries, both inside and outside Europe. As a result, Greek classrooms are multilingual and multicultural. The Greek state has taken a number of measures in response to the needs of bilingual students, such as offering reception classes for emergent bilinguals and establishing intercultural schools (Gropas & Triantafyllidou, 2011; Palaiologou & Faas, 2012). These measures aim to enhance Greek language knowledge and offer support with subject knowledge. In order to attend these remedial classes bilingual students are pulled out of the mainstream classes for a part of the school program. Once they complete these transitional classes, they are expected to become integrated into mainstream classes for the whole school program (Tzevelekou et al., 2013). It should be noted that the Greek educational system has been criticized for being ethnocentric and for promoting monolingualism (Frangoudaki & Dragonas, 1997). Moreover, teachers serving in mainstream classes were trained for homogeneous monolingual classes, lacking the know-how to create an inclusive intercultural environment (Mitakidou, Tressou, & Daniilidou, 2009; Mattheoudakis, Chatzidaki, & Maligkoudi, 2017). It is in this educational context that the teachers of primary and secondary education participating in this study have acquired their experiences as students and have later served as educators themselves.

In parallel to the public education system, the vast majority of students, around 80% according to Angouri, Mattheoudakis, and Zigrika (2010), attend afternoon language courses offered by private educational institutions, known as frontistiria. These institutions also offer language classes to adults in the context of lifelong learning. Our sample's L2 learning experiences were expected to come from this educational context in parallel to the language classes integrated into public school curriculum.

Previous research in pre-service English language teachers' beliefs in Greece has shown that they come into teacher education with a system of beliefs strongly based on their grammar-based language learning experiences (Mattheoudakis, 2007). In the

course of their studies these beliefs are reconstructed as the program offers targeted courses on second language learning challenging these views, but a significant percentage of the teacher students hold these beliefs throughout the program. When it comes to the training programs for teachers of primary education and Greek language and literature teachers of secondary education, courses on intercultural education, second language acquisition and teaching, have relatively recently been introduced into the curricula (Kourti & Androussou, 2013) and are limited in number compared to departments of Greek Universities oriented in second language education (e.g. departments of English Language and Literature). Therefore, we expected more traditional approaches to be prominent in our sample.

Finally, with regard to reflective writing, teacher education in the Greek context often involves reflective journal writing during teaching practice (Kaldi & Pirgiotakis, 2009; Vassilaki, 2017). This reflective assignment focuses on the efficacy of the intervention designed and implemented by the student-teachers, on classroom atmosphere and participants' feelings. Studies on such assignments have shown that the student-teachers' interventions focus on the language system in a decontextualized manner despite the accompanying discourse emphasizing "alternative" and "non-traditional" approaches (Vassilaki, Selimis & Gkana, 2021). Nevertheless, according to the curricula of several university departments with teacher preparation programs in Greece, no systematic teaching of the specific characteristics of reflective discourse is integrated in the programs, nor is autobiographical reflection a component of the teacher education curriculum.

In this study we probed into how past experiences as students have affected Greek teachers' beliefs and teaching practices. The research questions we sought to investigate were the following:

A. What are the teachers' perceptions of their experience writing an autobiographical reflective essay?

B. What were the prior educational experiences of teachers at primary schools as well as Greek language teachers at secondary public schools?

C. How do they perceive the impact of past educational experiences on their views and teaching practices?

D. Has reflection on prior learning experiences helped them identify and examine their perceptions of teaching bilingual students?

Method

Participants

Our sample comprised ten (10) teachers who were students of the Postgraduate Program "Current Trends in Linguistics for Teachers" offered by the Hellenic Open University. The student teachers attended a module on multilingualism and second language learning and teaching, in the context of which the reflective essay was assigned. The selection of the interviewees among the teachers attending the module was based on the existence of teaching experience with bilingual children.

Information about our participants' gender, current job position, educational background, years of teaching experience in multilingual classes and knowledge of foreign languages is presented in Table 1. All participating teachers were native speakers of Modern Greek and knew at least one other language. All had experience of language learning in a formal setting, as foreign language teaching is integrated into the Greek School Curriculum.

Table 1: Participants' profiles

ID	Gender	Current position	Educational background	Experience teaching multilingual classes	Foreign languages
P1	F	Primary Education	Faculty of Primary Education	2 years	English
P2	F	Primary Education	Faculty of Primary Education	12 years	English
P3	F	Secondary Education	Faculty of Greek Philology	20 years	English, German, Italian (beginner)
P4	F	Primary Education	Faculty of Primary Education	3 years	English, French (beginner)
P5	F	Secondary Education	Faculty of Primary Education & Faculty of Greek Philology	14 years	English, French
P6	F	Primary	Faculty of Primary	3 years	English, French

		Education	Education & Faculty of Greek Philology		
P7	F	Secondary Education	Faculty of Greek language	10 years	English
P8	F	Primary Education	Faculty of Primary Education & master's in special education	8 years	English, French, Italian
P9	F	Primary Education	Faculty of Primary Education	11 years	English, French, Spanish (beginner), German (beginner)
P10	M	Primary Education	Faculty of Primary Education	13 years	English

Data collection and analysis

Research data was collected through essays assigned in the context of the module the student-teachers attended as well as interviews with the participating student teachers. In particular, the focal student teachers were involved in a specific reflection procedure, which comprised five sequential stages: (1) First tutor-students' meeting and reflective discussion on the scope and aims of the essay, (2) writing of a reflective essay on their own experiences as L2 language learners, both positive and negative, (3) Tailored feedback on the reflective essay after its submission (4) Collective feedback in the context of a second tutor-students' meeting and, finally, (5) Conduction of interviews.

The interviews were semi-structured and the questions aimed to provide information on: (1) Teachers' profile (e.g. gender, age, educational background, years of teaching experience etc.), (2) How their personal experience as learners of a L2 had influenced their current teaching approach, (3) Differentiations in the teaching techniques between Greek as a L1 and Greek as a L2, (4) Challenges and positive aspects teachers had faced while writing their reflective essay, (5) Teaching techniques teachers may had redefined after the completion of their final reflective essay and, finally, (6) Possible changes in their attitudes towards their students after writing the reflective essay.

A total of 240 minutes of recorded material was collected which was later transcribed. In this article we present only these interview data and essays' extracts

which address our research questions. Interviews were analyzed following the 'thematic analysis' approach (Boyatzis, 1998). Ryan and Bernard (2000) locate thematic coding as a process performed *within* 'major' analytic traditions, rather than a specific approach in its own right. It is used to analyze classifications and present themes (patterns) that relate to the data. It illustrates the data in great detail and deals with diverse subjects via interpretations (Boyatzis, 1998). Codes developed for ideas or themes are then applied or linked to raw data as summary markers for later analysis, which may include comparing the relative frequencies of themes or topics within a data set, looking for code cooccurrence, or graphically displaying code relationships (Namey et al. 2008, p. 138).

The selection of themes was mapped on the research questions and were informed by the authors' theoretical perspectives. We continued to elaborate on the themes and sub-themes as they emerged by referring back to the data set. Using open coding, the authors identified themes that emerged from the interview responses (Creswell, 1998). In order to achieve saturation, we continued to look for instances that represented each of them until no new information appeared. The basic themes that occurred from the analysis were the following ones: (1) Teachers' perceptions of the reflective procedure, (2) Teachers' memories of L2 learning experience, (3) The influence of these personal learning experience on the teachers' beliefs and practices, (4) Reconsideration of the teachers' role in the educational procedure and, finally, (5) Teaching bilingual students in linguistically diverse classes.

Results

In their reflective essays, the participating teachers analyzed their personal L2 learning experiences in the light of the newly acquired knowledge on language learning and language education. While reflections should serve the function of prompting positive change in action (Ryan, 2012), this aspect was underdeveloped in the teachers' essays. Specifically, they did not evaluate how their past learning experiences affected their current teaching practices. This was touched upon in the interviews, where the teachers were asked to reflect on how their past educational experiences have shaped their teaching and whether the reflective process has led them to reconsider their language teaching.

Teachers' perceptions of the reflective procedure

For all the participants it was the first time they wrote a reflective essay, and they were not familiar with the reflection process. Several noted that it was a positive experience, even though they faced considerable challenges. According to their interviews, the main challenges were the following:

(1) The long time since their childhood, when their exposure to L2 teaching had started and their difficulty in recalling memories about their educational experience (5/10 teachers) ("*The greatest challenge was memory, because I could not...it was difficult to recall a lot of things from the past. A lot of years have passed...*" (P7)).

(2) Balancing the recounting of personal experiences with their critical appraisal and the supporting literature in the essay was mentioned as a challenging task by six teachers.

> *Because we had been familiarized with a totally different type of essays during this postgraduate program, I did not know how to combine my personal experience with the related literature and whether I should strengthen the part of my personal experience or add things to the literature.* (P1)

(3) The procedure of recalling memories and critically examining them on the basis of current views was considered a difficult and demanding task by two participants.

> *I was trying to remember what happened back then, and I can admit that at some points this was really difficult, because I felt…. how can I describe it? It was like in psychoanalysis. I would often stop writing and think "Wow, what was happening back then?".* (P2)

(4) The writing style of academic reflection and the language conventions of this genre, especially the use of the first person, was a point of concern for two participants.

> *I think there is a big trap when one writes a reflective essay, because with the use of the first singular and plural person, sometimes we step out of the academic style. We run this risk.* (P10)

On the other hand, the interviewees revealed the aspects of the reflection process perceived as positive. During their interviews, the majority stated that they felt they had reconsidered the way they perceived teaching and, more precisely, they had started reflecting further on the teaching practices their educators were using when they were L2 students. As a result, due to the reflective essay, they started observing how many of

these techniques they reproduced in their own teaching or had tried to avoid due to the negative impact they used to have on them (example from P1).

> *Yes, because it is like I realized the mistakes my educators made when I was a student and the mistakes I still make when I teach. In other words, there was a degree, a great degree of awareness towards this direction.* (P1)

Finally, it was mentioned that (self-) reflection should be a frequent practice for educators, as it improves their teaching techniques and helps them to reconsider their personal beliefs. One of the teachers was so enthusiastic about the reflective essay that suggested she would use it in her teaching practice, as the last example below shows.

> *This plays a great role. Yes, because you put yourself in the students' place. You give them the time they need, and you reflect on what you did not organize well, on what you did not emphasize enough or perhaps on whether at some point you did not give them enough time… And as a result, you return to something if needed or you make the required changes.* (P7)

> *It helped me because once more through myself I can understand them better. Because I understood myself better, I can understand my students better.* (P8)

> *Yes, I have thought that in upper high school, [..], maybe in the future at some point I will use it as a technique, I will use it with my students, I will provide them with an opportunity to write something like this.* (P3)

Teachers' memories

In the reflective essay, the vast majority of teachers described L2 learning experiences which took place during their childhood and adolescence. Only one referred to an educational experience she had as an adult. The early language learning settings were private educational institutions, i.e. frontistiria, along with language classes offered by the public school as part of the school curriculum. However, the focus in the essays was on the former context, with limited reference to the latter.

The participating teachers reported a variety of negative experiences from their foreign language classes. They mainly focused on the memorization of endless vocabulary lists out of context, the presentation of language structures with no reference to the communicative context of their use, and the emphasis on grammatical accuracy with excessive use of grammar drills. At the same time, several teachers noted that the courses they had attended did not promote the development of speaking and interaction

skills. Finally, the anxiety caused by the pressure to obtain a language certificate at a young age was mentioned by several teachers. P2, for example, noted:

During the months of my exam preparation, I attended classes six times a week for two hours each and spent my free time studying. The stress, anxiety and fatigue I felt, being only 15 years old, intensified due to the belief that people in my environment held that it was necessary for me to complete learning an L2 before I was 16 years old.

The participating teachers had positive memories to share too. During their studies, they had attended classes taught by educators who emphasized the use of language in context, used authentic material and multimodal texts, selected topics within their students' interests and opted for student-centered activities. However, despite the strong impressions left with their students, these educators were the minority in our teachers' educational history, as more traditional approaches prevailed. Only one of the participants stated that her language learning experiences could be regarded as positive on the whole.

As a more positive experience, I would characterize the teaching approach of one of my teachers. She relied on the communication approach and task-based activities, aiming at the acquisition of language through its use in communication situations and not through sterile memorization of rules. (P5)

During the interviews, the participating teachers made reference not only to their L2 learning experiences, but they also recalled memories from the general education mainstream classes, as they considered them relevant to their current teaching practices in linguistically diverse classes. The experiences they recalled were mostly negative. More specifically, several teachers reported that they were exposed to traditional teaching, where teacher-led activities prevailed, cooperative learning and differentiated instruction were absent, and lessons were organized around grammatical structures, focusing on sentence level rules and morphology. With regard to mainstream classes hosting bilingual students in particular, two of the participants commented that their teachers did not differentiate teaching according to the students' characteristics, ignoring in essence the bilingual students in class. The following excerpt illustrates this view.

If I remember myself as a student and my bilingual classmates -and there were several in elementary school- I remember that teaching was the same for them. Even if they did not speak Greek well and we could not communicate with them during the

break, I cannot recall my teacher doing anything different for them. I think that (he/she) did the same with just fewer expectations in comparison to us who had Greek as a L1. As a result, it had never occurred to me how differentiated teaching should be. (P6)

The influence of personal learning experiences on the teachers' views and practices

All participants stated that their own language learning experiences had influenced their teaching philosophies and practices, as shown in the following examples.

You learn how to teach, because you are based on what you have learned from your teachers. You may not realize it, but you gradually implement them. And reflecting on what and how I am teaching, I can see the connections with what I have experienced as a student. (P3)

I think that I have been influenced. I try to improve what I have experienced as a student. (P6)

The way past experiences influenced their teaching was described in different ways by the teachers. Two of them referred to their learning experiences as a factor constantly present and affecting their teaching practice, despite their efforts to tame this influence. Another five teachers identified it during the beginning of their teaching careers, when they employed more traditional techniques and resorted to decontextualized teaching. The impact of their educational background was reduced when they gained more teaching experience. Teaching practice led them to realize that traditional approaches were not effective and sought for alternative teaching methods. The following example is indicative of these views.

The way I was taught may have influenced me. Now, reflecting on certain things, I think there may be some features that..., due to my studies, I knew what is the right way to teach them. Of course, it was not the grammar-based method. There are more communicative approaches. However, in practice, especially over the first years I worked, when I was not so experienced, I believe that yes, there was this influence. Without realizing it of course... (P2)

Finally, the rest of the teachers highlighted the negative impact of their educational background and their desire to "escape" from the teaching practices they had experienced as students. They emphasized their determination from the outset of their careers to be different from their models and to avoid teacher-centered and grammar-based teaching.

> *I realize that if I asked from my students to process information in a similar way, they would face a lot of difficulties. I also realize that teaching approaches should be based on processing different text types and that image, sound and multimodality are important. This is an approach we did not have when I was taught English as a L2. And I remember that this traditional approach was implemented until higher levels of proficiency, not only in our first years.* (P6)

On the other hand, three of the participating teachers referred to instances of positive impact their language learning experiences had on their own teaching. Elements of their teachers' practices which had worked for them as students were adopted by these teachers. The use of students' full linguistic repertoire, multimedia and activities involving real life communication were mentioned as examples of good practices they had embraced.

> *I remember I had a teacher, who had a lot of ideas and changed the way of teaching completely, with various videos, pictures, some things that stayed with us, because these things stay with children, [..] and I think it helped me adopt various techniques from this particular teacher.* (P10)

Reconsidering the teachers' role in the educational procedure

The participating teachers discussed how knowledge gained through the reflection procedure had led them to reconsider their role in the educational procedure. Almost all of them noted that it helped them realize the need for contextualization in language teaching. In their view, teachers should focus on putting the items of language in meaningful contexts, relevant to the students' experiences, and should encourage active participation in activities requiring negotiation of meaning and experiential learning. The notion of culture also came up as an important aspect of language learning.

Two of the teachers referred to the fact that current teaching practices at schools had not significantly improved since they were students themselves, may it be foreign language teaching or other subjects of the school curriculum. With regard to the Greek language, according to one of the teachers, this is attributable to the restrictions imposed by a highly demanding curriculum, which does not allow teachers to use techniques originating from L2 teaching methodology.

> *I am in class with the children - I am a parallel support teacher[3] - and I see that teaching is done the same way as when I was a student, still too teacher centered unfortunately.* (P1)

Teaching bilingual students in linguistically diverse classes

With regard to the extent that focal teachers' attitudes and perceptions had changed towards their bilingual students after the completion of the reflective essay, the teachers acknowledged that the procedure helped them gain insight into the bilingual students' needs as they recalled their own needs and challenges during language learning. Their answers showed that their empathy had increased along with their willingness to adjust their teaching to their students' needs (example from P2 below). One of the teachers explicitly stated that she had never thought that her awareness of the language learning process acquired through reflection could be of use in her teaching practice.

> *I understand now where exactly they face difficulties and, more precisely, why they face difficulties. I realize to a greater extent the problems they may have during class. (P2)*

Nevertheless, two of our participants expressed their reservations regarding the applicability of the knowledge gained through the reflection procedure to their teaching of bilingual students attending Greek schools. They considered the context and the goals of language instruction quite different in the latter case compared to the foreign language instruction.

Despite the awareness raised, at the level of teaching practice teachers' opinions on whether one should apply different teaching methods in classes hosting bilingual students were mixed. According to some of them (5/10), differentiated instruction should be used for bilingual students, with the main differentiation mentioned being the use of students' first languages in the teaching process. P3 pointed out that an educator should take into account several factors during teaching ("level of language proficiency, exposure to L2, children's level in L1 and L2, class' level, number of bilingual students per class") and decide whether he/ she should use differentiated instruction or not. On the other side, four of the participating teachers noted that differentiated instruction is

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[3] Parallel Support is an educational provision for students with special educational needs who are integrated in mainstream classrooms (Koutsoklenis & Papadimitriou, 2021).

not recommended for bilingual students when they are in a class with monolingual students:

> *I was applying the same way of teaching for all of my students, regardless of whether they had Greek as a mother tongue or as a L2. (P1)*

With regard to the method used, two educators claimed that the communicative approach is the most appropriate one for bilingual students. The same educators argued that students who learn Greek as a L1 could be taught through a more grammatically-centered approach, because "the focus for them should be on grammar" (P2). On the other hand, another three educators explicitly stated that alternative teaching approaches should be adopted for both monolingual and bilingual students (i.e. "I see that we can attract students' interest to a greater extent, when we use other methods, more alternative, regardless of whether Greek is a L1 or a L2 for him/ her" (P9)).

Furthermore, P9 referred to the role that language errors play in the teaching process and claimed that through the reflective essay, she was given the opportunity to reconsider her role as an educator and enhance her role as a researcher. According to her, teachers should also act as researchers and seek the reasons for their bilingual students' mistakes, reflect on the effectiveness of their teaching practices and reinforce their willingness to help their students substantially.

Discussion

Our results indicated the usefulness of integrating reflection and reflective writing into teacher training, and in particular autobiographical reflection, which was of interest here. The focal teachers' perceptions of their experience writing a reflective essay were quite positive. They stated that it introduced them to the reflective way of thinking, a process that facilitates teaching, learning, and understanding, and argued that reflection should play a central role in their professional development. Our study's findings concur with the view that reflection is of major importance for teachers (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2010; Ramsey, 2010).

However, it was our participants' first attempt at reflective writing, and they were familiar with neither the reflection process nor the conventions of a reflective essay , even though they were at a postgraduate level. According to Rodgers (2002) and Ryan (2011), reflective writing in an academic context is a challenging task (Rodgers,

2002; Ryan 2011), however at a postgraduate level, students are expected to develop critical thinking and be 'reflective practitioners" (Moon, 2010).

Our participants' reflection was marked by several challenges. Firstly, future oriented thinking was not developed in the essays, as teachers did not elaborate on how this reflection procedure could inform and reform their own approach to teaching. This lack of the action-oriented dimension in student teachers' reflections has been reported in other studies too (Arrastia et al. 2014; Conway, 2001). Provision of relevant guidance and scaffolding is of key importance in deepening the reflective experience and in transforming practice (Arrastia et al. 2014; Ryan, 2011). Secondly, several teachers stated their uncertainty about the text type's structure and language choices. Systematic and explicit teaching on these would be beneficial, so that teacher students learn "how to communicate their disciplinary knowledge through reflection" (Ryan 2013, p. 144).

Our participants' educational experiences from L2 classes were both negative and positive, with the negative prevailing, verifying relevant remarks by Mattheoudakis (2007), who detected the impact of grammar-based language learning experiences on the beliefs of the student teachers participating in her study. In our data, the grammar-oriented lessons were characterized by memorization of new words out of context, the lack of communicative tasks, the emphasis on grammatical accuracy, and on obtaining language certificates.

However, it became obvious from the participants' reflection during the interviews that their apprenticeship in general education classes was a major source of influence in their teaching practice in linguistically diverse classes. In particular, the participants recalled teacher-centered teaching techniques, decontextualization, absence of cooperative learning and differentiated teaching, even when classes included bilingual students.

All the teachers acknowledged the influence of their own educational experiences in the way they teach and, thus, the reflective process helped them "gain some cognitive control over prior school experience" (Feiman-Nemser, 1983, p. 11). In other words, teachers managed to connect normalized past experiences to current teaching and observation (Boyd et al., 2013). We also identified a strong influence of what has been called the "anti-apprenticeship of observation" (Moodie, 2016) as the traditional approaches were rejected. This point of disruption in the transmission of traditional teaching presents itself as an opportunity for introducing contemporary literacy practices in teacher education. As Vassilaki, Selimis and Gkana (2021) note for

the Greek context, student teachers' desire to be "alternative" and "non-traditional" does not necessarily translate into innovative, contemporary approaches to language education. We would suggest that the reflective procedures need to be complemented by experience-based learning pedagogy (Moodie, 2016).

As reported in the literature (Ellis, 2004, 2006), multilingualism proved a valuable resource for teachers at linguistically diverse classes. Teachers' own language learning experiences, when recalled and scrutinized under the light of the newly acquired knowledge, provided an awareness of the language learning process. In fact, some of the teachers stated that they had adopted teaching techniques from their L2 classes based on the positive experiences they had as students, a finding that has been reported before in the relevant literature (Simon Borg, 2003). However, the formal educational context where our teachers acquired their second/additional language differs from the context they were required to teach Modern Greek. As a result, our findings indicated that the knowledge gained through reflection was not readily associated with the situation they had to deal with as teachers, i.e., teaching linguistically diverse classes. What is more, as in Moodie's study (2016), the mere awareness of the challenges their bilingual students faced, did not translate into informed teaching practice, seeing that some of the teachers were in favor of differentiated teaching while others were against.

Implications for teacher training

Teachers are a crucial factor in creating inclusive, plurilingual, democratic mainstream classes and teacher preparation programs should aim to enrich and expand their understanding regarding teaching in multilingual classes and responding to the differentiated needs and capacities of multilingual students. To this end, integrating reflection upon student teachers' educational and linguistic biographies in the teacher preparation curriculum can prove crucial, as their learning experiences impact the formation of their belief system and constitute a valuable resource to draw upon in their practice. This study has shown that educators of linguistically diverse classes in the Greek context have a wide repertoire of experiences as learners, i.e. experiences from both mainstream general education classes and foreign language classes. With regard to the latter, it was found that their plurilingual identities was not a resource that they readily activated when teaching bilingual students in mainstream classes. We would

argue that teacher training programs in tertiary education could substantially benefit from systematically integrating activities that assist student teachers make their plurilingual experiences explicit, examine them and realize their significance for practice, so that teachers are in a better position to foster plurilingual education (Ellis, 2013; 2016). Reflecting on their linguistic biographies and language learning experiences has the potential of enriching teacher education and adds to its transformative power.

Moreover, deep rooted educational experiences from mainstream general education classes are an aspect of student teachers' biographies that needs to be addressed, as they were found in this study to impact teachers' beliefs about teaching in linguistically diverse classes. Given that these experiences were in all likelihood formed in a non-inclusive, teacher-centered educational environment (Mitakidou, Tressou, & Daniilidou, 2009; Mattheoudakis, Chatzidaki, & Maligkoudi, 2017), they need to be brought to light and be critically examined. However, the reflective activities should be carefully planned, guided, and scaffolded, since initial attempts at reflection tend to be shallow and bearing little relevance to future practice, as evidenced in previous studies (Arrastia et al. 2014; Conway, 2001; Dyment & O'Connell, 2011; McIntosh, 2010) and confirmed for the Greek context in this study. Furthermore, examining teachers' own negative experiences as learners and having the desire to be different is a necessary first step, but needs to be complemented by hands-on experiences regarding teaching linguistically diverse classes.

Concluding, we would like to suggest that the effort to create an inclusive environment in mainstream education could be efficiently enhanced by teacher preparation and professional development programs which would integrate reflective activities on teachers' plurilingual biographies and would provide opportunities for student teachers to examine their relevance to teaching bilingual students.

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