

Empowering Student Voices: Innovative Strategies to Enhance English Speaking Skills in Greek Classrooms

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the teaching approaches of in-service teachers who teach English as a foreign language in the nine-year compulsory education system in Greek public schools. The research was conducted using semi-structured interviews with 24 teachers working in Northern Greece, aiming to highlight the teaching practices they implement to address the diverse preferences, interests, and needs of their students. The study also examines the methods these teachers use to encourage their students to use the English language, particularly in oral communication, to boost their confidence and reduce anxiety related to using English. The results show that teachers strive to motivate their students to use the English language by creating a pleasant and supportive classroom environment, organizing language activities that require student participation, employing innovative teaching approaches, and selecting or creating educational materials themselves.

Keywords: teaching, English language, foreign language teaching methodology, teaching practices of English language teachers

1. Introduction

The ability to use a foreign language is essentially equivalent to the ability to speak that language, as speaking skills are closely linked to overall language proficiency (Nunan, 2003). Therefore, speaking is the most important language skill in the context of learning a foreign language (Hughes, 2010). Teaching and learning oral communication are integral parts of any language education. Speaking not only offers opportunities for learning as the primary medium of communication in the classroom but is also a crucial component of the curriculum content and learning outcomes (Burns, 2019). However, teaching speaking in a foreign language remains a challenging and complex task for many teachers, as it is an intricate and dynamic skill involving the simultaneous use of multiple processes—cognitive, physical, and sociocultural. A speaker's knowledge and skills must be activated quickly in real time (Burns, 2019).

In order to teach speaking in a foreign language in a holistic and comprehensive manner, it is important for teachers to understand what the skill of speaking entails and how its different components interrelate (Burns, 2019). Speaking is a "combinatorial skill" that "involves the simultaneous execution of various actions" (Johnson, 1996). The role of the teacher is to structure students' learning experiences to support the development of their speaking skills both inside and outside the classroom, and this can be achieved by designing engaging and appropriate teaching materials (Goh & Burns, 2012).

However, this alone may not be enough. Teaching must occur in an environment that is highly encouraging and friendly for all students, who should be motivated to speak the foreign language (Harmer, 2007). In other words, teachers need to find engaging practices for teaching this skill so that all students participate fully and enjoyably in the learning process (Harmer, 2007). In order to study the practices that teachers use for teaching the English language in Greek public compulsory education, we are conducting this research, aiming to focus on those practices related to the development of speaking skills.

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2. Methodology

The purpose of this study is to present the conditions of English language teaching in the nine-year compulsory education system in Greece, specifically highlighting the teaching practices that teachers employ in their daily teaching activities. The specific objectives of the research include exploring the methods used by teachers to address the diverse preferences, interests, and needs of their students within the framework of student-centered learning, as suggested by the Unified Curriculum³ and required by modern methodological approaches to foreign language teaching. Additionally, the study aims to identify how teachers encourage their students to use the English language, particularly in oral communication, to participate in communicative activities in the classroom, to strengthen their confidence, and to reduce their anxiety related to using English.

To collect the research data, semi-structured interviews were utilized (Altrichter, Posch & Somekh, 1993). In addition to the three main questions outlined in the "interview guide," there was flexibility to add or remove questions or change their order if deemed necessary (Berg, 2001; Robson, 2002). Additionally, the methodology allowed for personal interaction with the research participants (Kvale, 2006: 481), enabling them to express themselves freely and spontaneously, which adds a new perspective to the research (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013).

The interviews were conducted in the first half of 2021 with twenty-four (24) teachers from public compulsory education in Northern Greece (regions: Katerini, Imathia, Pella, Kilkis, Thessaloniki, Chalkidiki, Kavala, and Evros). All the teachers who agreed to participate in the study were women. Eleven (11) of them hold a Master's degree, two (2) are currently pursuing a Master's degree, and one (1) is working towards a Ph.D. All participants have served in both private and public education, with total years of service ranging from 16 to 26 years for eleven (11) of them and from 27 to 36 years for the remaining thirteen (13). More than half of them have participated in Level A and B training seminars related to ICT (Information and Communication Technologies).

For the analysis of the research data, the content analysis method was used (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996; Stemler, 2000; White & March, 2006), which allows for both qualitative and quantitative approaches to interpreting written or spoken communication content and enables the extraction of valid conclusions (Berelson, 1952; Krippendorff, 2004). The following stages were implemented: defining the material to be analyzed and the objectives to be achieved, determining the coding units, and developing the system of categories/subcategories, which was cross-checked against the research questions.

3. Analysis of Research Data and Findings

The analysis of the material indicates that teachers strive to encourage their students to use the English language by creating a pleasant and supportive classroom environment. This is achieved through the organization of language activities in which students are invited to participate, the implementation of innovative teaching approaches, and the use or creation of educational materials by the teachers themselves.

Both in primary and junior high school, it is important "to maintain a relaxed atmosphere and create a sense of security for students" (E8), where active student participation is encouraged, and they can use the foreign language without the fear "that they will feel awkward or uncomfortable if they struggle or make a mistake" (E8). A key factor in creating such a positive classroom environment is the teacher, through their character, behavior, and the way they encourage students to use English while simultaneously avoiding the correction of their mistakes. To further enhance the classroom atmosphere, "what is valuable in a dedicated teacher is to convey the love for what they do... the love and care" (E15), as well as "using humor, challenging them to help them relax a bit because some are shy" (E22).

However, the use of humor by the teacher alone is not sufficient. The participants in our study believe that a balanced mix of relaxation and classroom control is necessary. One teacher remarked, "Especially with the younger ones, I tease them and say: 'I didn't know you were born in London! That was really well said!' ... with encouragement, and of course, I give a stern look to the others if someone is about to make a smart remark" (E24). Another teacher added that when a student attempts to use the English language and others are asked to correct them, "I demand respect... I do not allow mockery, teasing, etc. I am very strict about that" (E16).

³ The Unified Curriculum for Foreign Languages in Greek compulsory education (primary school and junior high school) is designed by the Greek Institute of Educational Policy and follows the educational policy for foreign languages and the guidelines of the European Commission. Its aim is to protect linguistic diversity and to promote language learning for reasons of cultural identity and social integration.

Some teachers believe that creating a pleasant classroom atmosphere that encourages student initiative and free expression requires understanding and accepting diversity. They state that they strive to create "a positive classroom environment so that students enjoy the process without fear... a climate of democracy and respect within the classroom" (E5), while also rewarding "initiative and free expression of thought" (E5).

In their efforts to encourage students to participate in class and use the English language, teachers employ verbal prompts⁴, with "praise" being predominant in both Primary and Secondary education. In Secondary education, teachers seem to prefer using words and phrases for encouragement, offering advice to students, and repeating words. They mention: "Sometimes I remind them to use English by saying 'In English, please,' other times I continue speaking in English, and sometimes I tell them to speak in simple sentences without needing to think in a complicated way. When they don't finish their phrase or sentence and hesitate, I often repeat their last word to encourage them to continue..." (E3). Some of the participants in our research mention that they use non-verbal prompts, such as "the tone of voice" (E13) and the color of the voice, while others also use body language, with a particular preference for facial expressions, e.g., "nodding affirmatively" (E1), "smiling" (E17), "raising an eyebrow to the sky" (E12), and gestures, e.g., "body language... nodding heads" (E12).

A practice that many teachers reported preferring in their efforts to encourage hesitant students is the "avoidance of correcting mistakes," in order to allow students "to express themselves and communicate without feeling anxious about the correctness of their sentences" (E3). It is natural for students to make mistakes, and even quite a few, as they attempt to use the English language, especially in the early stages of learning. However, as one teacher notes, "I don't correct them much when they make mistakes, especially when they are beginners" (E7). Some of the participants adjust their correction approach based on the age of the students, telling them "it doesn't matter" (E17) and explaining that "we learn from our mistakes" (E17) when they do make errors. One teacher characteristically mentions: "We accept mistakes as part of the educational process, and the younger the children, the less I correct them" (E20), while any corrections she makes are done discreetly, repeating what the student said but "in the correct way without emphasizing that they made a mistake" (E20).

Finally, one teacher, in an effort to encourage her students to use the English language and gradually help them overcome the fear of making mistakes, confronts them with the fact that we make mistakes even when using our native language. She mentions: "Many times, I start by speaking Greek and intentionally making a mistake in Greek. Then I tell them, 'See? I am Greek, I know Greek well, and yet I made a mistake here. There's no problem in making a mistake.' I try to tell them that you learn from mistakes, and it's not a big deal" (E11).

In addition to creating a supportive environment, teachers report that in order to encourage students to use the English language, they communicate exclusively in English and ask their students to do the same. They implement innovative teaching approaches, use engaging educational materials, and involve students in interesting communicative and collaborative activities that are focused on their interests.

In primary school, teachers try to speak "in English as much as possible" so that students "become familiar with and listen to the foreign language, so they can use it themselves" (E16). They also aim to serve as role models for their students, as "when you want them to speak English, you must speak English too" (E21). Similarly, teachers in junior high school seek to use the English language in the classroom, even to manage teaching-related matters and communicate with their students. They encourage their students to use English "by having conversations with them" (E4) and by urging them "to communicate with each other in English" (E21). However, it is noted that when some students do not speak English very well, a combination of "both English and Greek" (E12) is used. As one teacher explains, "what I say in English, I repeat in Greek because there may always be a few, two or three students who don't understand" (E12).

Additionally, teachers make sure to involve students in communicative activities that align with their interests to ensure their active participation. They encourage students to talk "about topics they are familiar with" and that "interest them" (E5), to share "their experiences" (E5), and to express "their opinions on various current issues" (E5).

The aforementioned communicative activities in which teachers involve their students to promote the use of the English language, particularly as noted by junior high school teachers, are usually carried out in pairs or groups of students. This approach also fosters collaboration, as students are integrated "into group activities where they might need to work with students who are not their friends, in order to communicate effectively with new people" (E3). Meanwhile, the teacher's role is described as "advisory" and "supportive" (E1).

⁴ Spontaneous or planned actions by teachers aimed at motivating student participation (Kanakis, 1999).

The teachers who participated in our research specifically highlighted the use of innovative teaching approaches, such as drama games, project-based learning, and brainstorming, in order to encourage their students to use the English language.

Regarding drama games, teachers, especially those in primary education, seem to particularly favor "role play" as students, through the roles they are asked to portray, "gain more confidence" (E11), "have fun while simultaneously practicing the use of the foreign language in an authentic way" (E6). For very young primary school students, "theatrical performances" or "puppet shows" (E2) are preferred. "Projects" and the activity of "brainstorming" are practices used by a few teachers, although one teacher mentions that brainstorming is a very traditional method to begin approaching a topic because "it is the solution for everything" (E12).

Finally, to encourage the use of the English language in the classroom, teachers report using educational materials such as songs, games, audiovisual resources, and applications related to new technologies. In primary school, particularly with younger students, teachers more frequently implement "many games and songs" (E17) because they are enjoyable and fun, and students "forget and learn through play" (E18). They also use "pictures, videos, and flashcards to enhance visual literacy alongside language use" (E3) with topics related "to the themes of the textbook..." (E6) or selected based on current events and the interests of young students, "focusing on contemporary topics that excite them" (E5). Always aiming to stimulate student interest, some teachers mention that they employ new technologies, using "various new techniques" they learned through training "at the B2 level, ICT" (E21).

4. Discussion

As evident from our research, teachers who teach the English language in public compulsory education place significant emphasis on implementing practices they consider essential for encouraging students to use English in oral communication within the classroom. The findings show that these teachers make a concerted effort to achieve this goal. The practices that teachers seem to prefer the most involve fostering the fundamental conditions for learning by creating a pleasant and supportive classroom environment, generating and maintaining motivation through engaging students in interesting language activities to make language learning enjoyable for them, and using educational materials.

Most of the teachers' reports relate to creating a supportive and pleasant atmosphere, which positively impacts foreign language learning (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986; Dufeu, 1994; Grenfell & Harris, 1999; Oxford, 1990, 2003; Dörnyei, 2001, 2006). To achieve this, teachers strive to be supportive, encourage their students both verbally and non-verbally, and avoid correcting mistakes made while attempting to speak the foreign language. They consider the teacher's interest in their teaching work, collaborative and democratic spirit, humor, and patience as particularly important traits, which have been highlighted by researchers (Girard, 1977; Borg, 2006; Taratori, Stravakou & Kougiourouki, 2006). The teacher's role in creating a pleasant classroom environment and thereby establishing a crucial condition for foreign language learning has also been demonstrated by Brosh (1996), Bell (2005), Borg (2006), Arıkan, Taser & Sarac-Suzer (2008), Shishavan & Sadeghi (2009), and Barnes & Lock (2013).

Another practice that several of the teachers in our research use to boost students' confidence in learning a foreign language is encouragement, the contribution of which has been emphasized by many researchers (Ellis, 1985; Lightbown & Spada, 1999; Zafar & Meenakshi, 2012). They use verbal and non-verbal reassurances toward their students, both as a form of praise and as encouragement to actively participate in the lesson and use the foreign language. At the same time, they avoid correcting students' mistakes when using the foreign language to prevent causing them embarrassment. This practice is highlighted by many researchers as an important component in creating an environment where students, without hesitation and fear of ridicule, feel comfortable enough to dare to use the foreign language (Beebe, 1983; Dufeu, 1994).

Additionally, some teachers in our research report that they try to build their students' confidence by speaking the foreign language themselves in the classroom and encouraging their students to do the same, a practice supported by the research of Walsh (2002), Pujiastuti (2013), and Jing & Jing (2018).

Teachers also assign their students to participate in communicative activities in pairs or groups, where they will feel more secure and free to express themselves (Brown, 2001). The effectiveness of grouping students into pairs or groups in the context of learning a foreign language has also been demonstrated by the research of Storch (2007), Coskun (2011), Xue (2013), and Li (2019). Moreover, engaging them in communicative activities contributes to the use of the foreign language in the classroom and prepares them for using it in real-life situations outside of school (Nunan, 1989; Lightbown & Spada, 1999; Brown, 2000; Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Wesche & Skehan, 2002; Andon, 2010).

Teachers in our research also mention the implementation of innovative teaching approaches, such as drama games and particularly role-playing in the classroom. These approaches, as highlighted by Lin (2009), Duong (2014), Krebt (2017), and Flora & Sukirlan (2021), promote students' communication skills and fluency in using the foreign language in an enjoyable and creative way.

Finally, in their effort to follow new trends and provide students with learning incentives and opportunities to engage with the authentic use of language, teachers report that they use educational material that, as emphasized by Richards (2001), Littlejohn (2012), Tomlinson (2012), McDonough, Shaw, & Mashura (2013), and Solak & Çakir (2015), should be designed to capture students' interest. This educational material can be created and delivered through new technologies, whose effectiveness in language learning has been demonstrated by the research of Mathew & Alidmat (2013), Chen Hsieh, Wu & Marek (2017), and Herrera Mosquera (2017). Among the educational materials used by the teachers in our research are songs and games, which they mention as efforts to make their lessons enjoyable and effective. Games help students gain fluency and confidence in using the foreign language and motivate them to continue learning it (Sharpe, 2001; Masri & Najjar, 2014), while songs help them improve their listening skills, pronunciation, speech production, vocabulary, and language structures (Murphey, 1992).

In conclusion, to encourage their students to use the English language, particularly in spoken communication, and to enhance their confidence while reducing anxiety related to using English, teachers strive to create a pleasant and supportive classroom environment. They aim to foster an atmosphere of respect and acceptance, organize enjoyable and engaging language activities, and design innovative teaching approaches and educational materials that will capture and sustain their students' interest.

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