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Contents

Letter from the publisher	5
Articles	
Developing Critical Thinking and Collaboration through AI-Powered Scenario-Based Learning: An Ecological Approach to Experiential Education	7
Dr Lilit Sargsyan, Yerevan State University, Armenia	
Application of Artificial Intelligence in Foreign Language Learning	17
Dr Sashka Jovanovska, Goce Delcev University, Republic of North Macedonia	
Bridging Psycholinguistic Research and L2 Pedagogy: Implications for Teaching Orthographic and Phonological Awareness in English Learners	32
Dr María Teresa Martínez García, University of Valladolid, Spain	
Integrating Augmented Reality in creative story writing for English language learning	41
Angeliki Voreopoulou, 15th Primary School of Evosmos, Greece & Antigoni Parmaxi, Cyprus University of Technology, Cyprus	
The Phenomenon of Allomorphy in English: Descriptive Approach and Teaching Implementations using Corpora and other Technologies	50
Vasiliki Vlachou, University of the Aegean, Greece	
Benefits of efficient communication skills at the social level	67
Renáta Bernhardt & Rita Szaszko, Eszterházy Károly Catholic University & Laura Furcsa, Budapest Business University, Budapest, Hungary	
Fostering Multilingual Proficiency: Trilingualism in Greek Primary Schools. The case of children with learning disabilities.	76
Alevizou Konstantina, Hellenic American University & Frantzeskaki Evdoxia, University of Cyprus	
ELT in Chinese General Senior High School: An Analysis of Chinese ELT Textbooks	86
Scaringella Francesco Michael, University of Milan, Italy	

**Teaching English as a lingua franca to University students of
Business and Tourism: intercultural communication towards a
holistic perspective of self**

94

Dr Zoi Antonopoulou, University of Piraeus, Greece

Fostering Multilingual Proficiency: Trilingualism in Greek Primary Schools. The case of children with learning disabilities.

Alevizou Konstantina & Frantzeskaki Evdoxia

Alevizou Konstantina

Affiliation: Hellenic American University, Greece

Email: conny_alev@hotmail.com

Frantzeskaki Evdoxia

Affiliation: University of Cyprus, Cyprus

Email: evie_frantjeskaki@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper investigates the implementation of trilingual education in Greek primary schools, with a particular focus on students who have learning disabilities. This article examines how trilingual curricula—encompassing Greek, English, and an additional foreign language—can be designed to support diverse learning needs. Results indicate that well-structured trilingual programs, bolstered by differentiated instructional strategies and assistive technologies, can enhance language acquisition and academic self-esteem among learners with learning disabilities. Additionally, collaborative planning between mainstream and special education teachers emerged as a vital component in addressing individual student challenges. These issues highlight the need for sustained teacher training, resource allocation, and inclusive policy frameworks that promote equal access to language learning opportunities. Ultimately, this paper underscores the transformative potential of trilingual education in fostering both linguistic proficiency and social inclusion for all students in Greek primary schools.

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Keywords: Trilingualism, Cognitive development, Language proficiency, Teaching strategies, Learning disabilities

Introduction

It is suggestive that since trilingualism is a rather recent field of research there are a lot of differentiations on its definitions. Many encounters have been made so far to approach a definition of trilingualism. Most of them have been through bilingualism. Trilingualism has also been seen as a branch of bilingualism or even as an extension of bilingualism (Anastassiou, 2014).

So far literature on multilingualism, including the one on trilingualism, has seen these speakers' qualities in several ways; Bloomfield (1933), accepted as "true" multilinguals only those that have

gained a mastery of all of their languages in a native like manner. Multilingualism is still seen as an exceptional quality although monolinguals are in today's world more of a rare case. Jessner (2008) has criticized the belief that trilinguals are still seen as three monolinguals in one, as well as that a true multilingual does not mix his/ her languages.

Nowadays, the most common scientific view of trilingualism, that most researchers consent to, refers to multilingual speakers who have gradually obtained the ability to communicate in each one of their languages; extending from simple understanding/communicating capabilities to the "model" of a solid multilingual person. In this sense, effective communication in each of the multilingual speaker's languages sets functional multilingualism, irrespectively of the patterns monolinguals use according to their age defined abilities (Tokuhama-Espinoza, 2001, 2003). Typical cases of L3 learners as found in the literature on multilingualism include:

- a) children growing up with three languages from birth (Oksaar 1983; Hoffmann 1985; Barnes, 2005),
- b) bilingual children learning an L3 – in many cases English – at school at an early age, is the case in the Basque Country (Cenoz, 2005) or in South Tyrol (Jessner, 2006),
- c) bilingual migrant children moving to a new linguistic environment, such as Kurdish/ Turkish children learning German in Austria (Brizic, 2006).

Therefore, this definition, can apply to several types of trilingual speakers; adults who learn two foreign languages informally or within school context either at the same time or in later phases of their lives, early childhood bilinguals who are learning a third language later as children or as adults, as well as children who grow up by being in touch with three languages ever since they were born or as very young learners and can speak all of them fluently.

Different languages are used for different purposes, proficiency in each varying according to such factors as register, occupation and education". Cenoz and Genesee (1998) suggested that a student should be defined as trilingual if he can use his three languages to communicate in both oral and written speech. Furthermore, they described multilingualism as the final result of the process of acquisition of several non-native languages.

Hufeisen (1998) has added that multilingualism should be used to refer to the learning of more than two languages. It is proven that multilingualism can be described as a developmental and simultaneously a controversial phenomenon, since there is a plethora of attempts providing definitions under various scopes and prisms. In fact, De Angelis (2007: 11) has suggested that the term "third or additional language acquisition" would be more appropriate within the scope of multilingualism as it does not equate the bilingual speaker with the multilingual one.

1. Types of Trilingual Settings

Multilinguals may use several languages due to their different social, cultural and economic backgrounds and field of using their specific languages. They might live in a multilingual community, or bilingual communities, or they might be in contact with several monolingual communities during their everyday routines or social life. Their proficiency in each of their languages is possible to differ,

and might change over time (Herdina & Jessner, 2002). The multilinguals' languages can have distinguished roles and functions, they may use them separately or code switch and code mix and last but not least they are still seen as multilinguals even if they use three or even six languages. The ability of a person to speak more than one language can occur under a variety of conditions. This is especially true in cases of natural trilingual acquisition within families, as discussed by Cruz-Ferreira (2006), where children acquire multiple languages simultaneously from birth in varied social contexts. Edwards (1994: 39) states that "in most instances, multilingualism arises, and is maintained, through contact and necessity". The emergence of three languages can exist when in each language there is both a source of input and the necessity for communication. Cases of trilingualism can be subdivided into four interrelated variables:

- (a) the age of the speaker when he made his first important contact with the language,
- (b) the input they receive (type, modality and quantity)
- (c) the level of proficiency in each language and
- (d) the order that the languages were obtained. It is not compulsory that the previously mentioned variables should be independent, although this may also be the case.

For example, the time the speaker made his first contact with the specific languages could have a close correlation with the input, i.e. younger speakers could be expected to have a more "naturalistic way of acquiring their language" than older speakers, although this correlation can be a generalization that could be easily argued. Apart from that, when three languages are involved, there are many inherent variations in each learner, within each variable, as in the occasion of all cases of language acquisition. It has to be clarified that the manifestation of the previously mentioned variables leads in various possibilities that may all outline different types of trilingual speakers and such situations can be further divided according to the age of the speaker, the type and amount of input they receive and the proficiency in each language, considering also the order of acquisition.

According to Hoffman (2001: 3) the following classification can be suggested: a) Trilingual children who grew up having adapted two home languages different from the one spoken in the community. b) Trilingual children grown up in a bilingual community and their home language (either spoken by one or both of their parents) is different from the language spoken in the community. c) Third language learners, that is, bilinguals who obtain a third language in the context of school education. d) Bilingual individuals who have turned into trilinguals through immigration. e) Individuals that belong to trilingual communities.

2. English as a second/third language in Greek Private Schools

Research in learning English as a third language has attracted significant attention in the recent years, since it is the main language of communication among European Union citizens. Jessner indicated that "in a growing number of countries worldwide English is learnt and taught as a third language." (2006: 2). Thus, English is seen as a factor in the formation of trilingualism and the spread of English. In 2001, Eurostat found that 90 percent of pupils in secondary schools in the European Union learn English (Pilos, 2001), and according to "The Key Data on Teaching Languages at School

in Europe” (2012) it is confirmed that English is by far the most taught foreign language in nearly all European countries. In this sense, English is in many cases a second or even a third and not a foreign language and it is in contact with other languages since many European countries are bilingual or multilingual.

According to the “Eurobarometer” (2012) conducted by the European Commission, 74% of the Greeks believe that English is the most useful language for their personal development, while the total of the Europeans that took part in that study answered to that question that English is the most useful in 64%. Also, Greeks believe that English is the most useful language for their children’s future in 92% while Europeans believe the same thing in 79%. Finally, 51% of the Greeks stated that they are confident in having a conversation in English, whereas only 9% of the participants were confident with French. Clearly, this reinforces the perception that English is by far the most “popular” foreign language in Greece and thus widely taught and learnt. Also, it has a high prestige within the Greek population and children are introduced to it from an early age (most of them around the age of seven).

Moreover, English is nowadays one of the languages the majority of the multilinguals own since it is being learnt as a second, third or fourth foreign language. English is actually a *lingua franca* and although this term is used according to Crystal (1997: 454) as “a medium of communication for people that speak different first languages”, Cenoz and Jessner (2000: 248) point out that in the case of Europe specifically this term should be also used for people speaking different second languages too. This particular suggestion sums up the great diversity of the language situation within Europe today as well as the implications (linguistic, social, economic and political) that will emerge in the near future.

In most European countries, English had been taught as an additional language with a foreign language methodology, however nowadays it is common that it is taught as a third language. For instance, the case of immigrants from non-European countries who learn the official language of the country they have migrated in and they also familiarize themselves with English at school. Research into trilingualism (Rothman, Iverson & Judy, 2011) also looks at bilingual children’s acquisition of the third language through schooling. Most of the schoolchildren in Greece learn English as a second language with a foreign language curriculum and methodology.

In fact, English is the first foreign language that every Greek pupil will start with, since there is the belief that it is a global language and the most useful one towards their professional future life (Kotadaki, Kosma, Karagianni, 2016). There have been more languages introduced in public schools and children (and their parents) have had the opportunity of learning French, German, Italian, and in some schools Spanish. Greek children are, yet, considered as one of the most multilingual learners within Europe, since the vast majority of them have attended foreign language classes and they have also sat the relevant language exams to gain the relevant certificates.

In the present day, the multilinguality of the Greek children has fostered even further due to the fact that during the last twenty years or so children coming from immigrant families have comprised the striking majority of the student body. Thereby, there has been a shift in foreign languages education in Greece in the public schools, as well; in private schools, multilingualism has been fostered for decades as there are English-speaking, French-speaking and even German-speaking

private schools, which focus on teaching the specific European language at a native speaker level and promoting the culture of the country as well (Anastassiou, 2014, pp.19-20).

3. From Monolingualism and Bilingualism to Trilingualism

The progression from monolingualism to bilingualism, and subsequently to trilingualism, is a dynamic and multifaceted process that has captured the attention of linguists, educators, and psychologists. While monolingualism involves the use of only one language, bilingualism introduces a second linguistic system, often leading to cognitive, social, and educational advantages (Hoffmann, 2001b). Trilingualism, however, introduces an additional layer of complexity, encompassing the interaction of three linguistic systems, which requires advanced cognitive and metalinguistic abilities (Jessner, 2008).

Studies on trilingualism emphasize that it is not merely an extension of bilingualism but rather a distinct phenomenon that presents unique challenges and opportunities. De Angelis (2007) suggests that learners of a third language (L3) draw from their existing linguistic repertoire, utilizing both their first (L1) and second languages (L2) to navigate the acquisition process. This cross-linguistic influence is often more pronounced in trilinguals, as competing linguistic systems interact and contribute to the learning process (De Angelis & Selinker, 2001).

Research has also highlighted the differences in cognitive processing between bilinguals and trilinguals. For example, Hoffmann (1985) observed that trilingual individuals often develop heightened metalinguistic awareness due to their need to manage and differentiate between three linguistic systems. This aligns with Jessner's (2008) Dynamic Systems Theory (DST) model of multilingualism, which underscores the importance of metalinguistic awareness in fostering language learning and proficiency.

Furthermore, studies such as those by Cenoz and Jessner (2000) have explored the sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic aspects of trilingualism, emphasizing that the acquisition of a third language is influenced by various factors, including the learner's motivation, exposure to the target language, and the context in which the language is learned. Cenoz and Genesee (1998) also argue that multilingual education must be tailored to accommodate the unique needs of trilingual learners, as they face distinct challenges compared to bilinguals.

Anastassiou (2014) highlights the role of L3 speech production in trilingual children, noting that the interplay between L1 and L2 can either facilitate or inhibit the development of L3 skills. This finding is echoed by Dewaele (2001), who discusses the activation and inhibition of linguistic systems in trilingual individuals, suggesting that these processes play a crucial role in determining the degree of cross-linguistic influence.

From an educational perspective, there is a growing recognition of the need to support trilingual learners, particularly those with specific learning difficulties, such as dyslexia or ADHD (Kormos, 2017; Barkley, 2015). Schneider and Crombie (2003) advocate for differentiated instruction methods to address the unique challenges faced by multilingual learners, ensuring that they can thrive in a multilingual environment.

Moreover, multilingualism has been shown to provide cognitive and cultural benefits. Oksaar (1983) emphasizes that trilingualism fosters greater cultural awareness and adaptability, as learners engage with diverse linguistic and cultural frameworks. Similarly, Edwards (1994) highlights the

importance of trilingual competence in an increasingly globalized world, where the ability to navigate multiple linguistic contexts is becoming a valuable asset.

Despite these advantages, the path from monolingualism to trilingualism is not without its challenges. Brizic (2006) points out that immigrant children, in particular, may face difficulties in acquiring an L3 due to limited exposure to the target language and conflicting demands from their L1 and L2 environments. However, research by Tokuhamma-Espinosa (2001) suggests that with appropriate support and educational strategies, trilingual learners can overcome these challenges and achieve high levels of linguistic competence.

In conclusion, the transition from monolingualism and bilingualism to trilingualism represents a complex and dynamic process that requires a nuanced understanding of linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural factors. By fostering metalinguistic awareness and providing tailored support, educators can help learners navigate the challenges of trilingualism and unlock its cognitive and cultural benefits.

4. Learning Disabilities and Language Acquisition

4.1 Overview of Common Learning Disabilities and Their Impact on Language Learning

Learning disabilities encompass a range of neurobiological conditions that impact skill acquisition, retention and utilization. It is especially pertinent in school-aged children who are expected to learn a language (Geary, 2011). The majority among them are dyslexia, ADHD and dyscalculia, all of which have different ramifications and impact the child differently within an educational setting. Take, for example, dyslexia – it is a reading problem which is associated with the impairment of phonological processing. This makes decoding and encoding language a challenge for many young children and, in turn, reading fluency as well as vocabulary acquisition becomes problematic (Snowling & Hulme, 2012).

On the other hand, ADHD creates problems with attention regulation, working memory, task organization, and others crucial for language learning and where focus needs to be maintained aided through numerous exercises (Barkley, 2015). Whereas, dyscalculia is famously understood regarding its impact with numbers, however it can also induce spatial and sequential patterns grasping behavior and shape multitasking language learning (Geary, 2011). The additive effect of learning disabilities is worsen when compounded with multilingualism since there is a greater cognitive burden placed on dividing attention across multiple language systems and stimuli. Dong so, bespoke forms of assistance tend to be the most effective for pupils with learning disabilities in developing their complicated language skills which places a spotlight on the need for inclusive pedagogical approaches (Snowling & Hulme, 2012).

4.2 Existing Studies on Multilingual Learners with SEN

Research on bilingual and trilingual education for students with learning disabilities has revealed a nuanced picture of both challenges and opportunities. Early concerns suggested that learning multiple languages might overwhelm children with special educational needs (SEN), potentially exacerbating their difficulties (Schneider & Crombie, 2003).

However, more recent studies have demonstrated that, with appropriate interventions, bilingual and trilingual education can yield significant cognitive and social benefits even for these learners. For instance, Paradis (2016) argued that bilingual children with specific language impairment (SLI) are proficient in both languages as long as there is a methodological, individualized teaching approach on both languages. In the same manner, Kormos (2017) notes, the use of phonics software and speech to text aids as important barriers to learning languages for students with learning disabilities. In particular, trilingual instruction has been found to improve meta-linguistic knowledge by broadening students' understanding of language and enhancing critical thinking skills (Jessner, 2008). This research attempts to disprove previously held misconceptions by stating that multilingual education is possible and beneficial for all students if done properly.

4.3 Strategies for Effective Language Learning

The most appropriate and productive language learning for learners suffering from learning disabilities involves cognitive and language specific strategies: modification where needed. As noted by Jessner (2008) metalinguistic awareness enables cognitive flexibility which allows students to transfer knowledge across languages effortlessly. This can be facilitated with exercises that categorize languages by grammar and syntax differences. The ability to understand and manipulate language structures, also referred to as metalinguistic awareness, is crucial for learning languages, especially for children suffering from learning disabilities.

An additional approach that teachers can incorporate is the use of the multisensory teaching method, which works through seeing, hearing, and moving, which is especially effective for children with learning disabilities. Schneider and Crombie (2003) explain that the use of several senses together improves memory recall. Teachers can combine visual means of instruction: flashcards, color drawings, and pictures with auditory instruction songs and sound patterns while motivating children's participation through active instruction such as tracing letters, gesturing, or even dancing to the language.

Technology provides valuable resources to support language learning for children with learning disabilities. As noted by Kormos (2017), digital tools can reduce the stress associated with traditional language instruction by allowing students to learn at their own pace. Apps like Duolingo or Quizlet Vocabulary can be used for vocabulary acquisition and reinforcement. Students with learning difficulties have a higher amount of anxiety and lower self-esteem, making them less capable of acquiring language. Paradis (2016) highlights this concept using a model of creating a safe space for doling out constructive critiques — so that makes the next round of feedback more well received and less of an attack. This can be achieved by offering consistent praise and reinforcement for small achievements to build confidence and by promoting collaborative learning opportunities, where peers work together on language activities, fostering both social and linguistic skills.

Conclusion

Educators, policymakers, and researchers need to know how learning disabilities impact language acquisition. While multilingualism can positively impact cognition and sociability, it also poses unique challenges to students who have learning disabilities. Meanwhile, we humanely complement innovative educational processes in the school context, removing factors that cause students to lack the chances of a multilingual environment.

While steps have been taken to grasp the link of learning troubles and many languages, a few areas need to be examined. Research that follows many language learners with learning troubles can give better understanding of their thinking growth and how they learn languages. Also, comparing ways to teach and use tools can find the best tricks for helping three-language learners with learning troubles. More study is needed to look at how culture and language mix affects the learning time of kids with disabilities in many language places. Finally, checking and improving teacher training efforts can make sure that teachers are ready to help kids who speak many languages.

To conclude, helping students with learning disabilities become fluent in three languages is both a hurdle and a chance for growth. By using proven methods, offering supportive teaching and keeping up with research, we can unlock the full potential of multilingual education. This way, we can create welcoming learning environments that help every student thrive.

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