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Mediation in the Greek primary school: a tool for the improvement of young learners' writing?

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Abstract

Acknowledging the prominent role of mediation, especially after its inclusion as a component of the new curriculum for the teaching of foreign languages in the Greek education (ΕΠΕ-ΕΓ, 2011), the study presented investigated whether and to what extent engaging young learners of the Greek state primary school in written mediation practices can help improve their writing performance. Towards this, an action research was conducted through the implementation of a supplementary writing syllabus, consisting of four written mediation lessons, an entry and an exit writing test used to assess learners' writing performance, as well as questionnaires administered to learners both before and after the study to examine their attitudes towards written mediation practices. Through the analysis of the collected data it was found that the implementation of written mediation not only resulted in the improvement of young learners' writing performance, but also had a positive impact on their attitudes and feelings towards writing.

Keywords: mediation, young learners, writing performance, motivation, positive attitudes

JEL classifications: I20 General, I21 Analysis of education, I29 Other

Introduction

Taking into consideration the continuous social, political, financial, scientific and technological changes in both the international and the Greek community, as well as the emerging challenges posed by the European Union' s policies and the European Committee's directions for the promotion of plurilingualism, a new curriculum for the teaching of foreign languages in the Greek compulsory education (ΕΠΕ-ΕΓ), common for all the foreign languages offered in the Greek state schools, has been recently proposed, signaling a change in the way these are to be taught.

This new curriculum encompasses several characteristics of the so far existing one, but is considered to be innovative, since its main pedagogic aim is to help learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) develop linguistic awareness, intercultural awareness and mediation skills and render them into citizens who can:

- function effectively in various social and communication contexts function as cultural and linguistic mediators in order to facilitate communication between people from different social or cultural groups
- use the language in order to participate in actions of the international community
- negotiate already known and new linguistic, social and cultural meanings and thus communicate with others (ΕΠΕ-ΕΓ, 2011,p.8-9).

Within this framework, language is viewed as a social practice, since a socially defined and functional use of language is promoted and learners are expected to develop the necessary skills for the comprehension and

production of meanings in specific socio-cultural contexts and through various types of oral and written texts. Moreover, the need for the promotion of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism in the Greek EFL primary classroom, stemming from the nature of "the new Greek reality with the influx of economic immigrants (who often use English in their everyday interaction with Greeks)" (Stathopoulou, 2009, p.24), prioritizes the development of learners' mediation skills and renders it necessary for mediation tasks to be implemented. This is furthermore dictated not only by viewing the exploitation of learners' s mother tongue, namely Greek, as an important resource in the EFL teaching and learning process, but also by the inclusion of mediation tasks in the assessment of learners' written speech production in the examinations of the National Foreign Language Exam System (Kratiko Pistopiitiko Glossomathias-KPG).

The notion and history of mediation

Mediation practices have for long prevailed and played an important role in most forms of social life, and, as Dendrinos (2006, p.12) comments in her illuminating article "Mediation in communication, language teaching and testing", "mediation is required and it occurs everywhere", constituting an intermediary action employed in order to "facilitate communication between others or help them resolve a problem, conflict, etc., which requires deeper understanding of what is said or written"(ibid, p.11).What is more, given the fact that "knowledge is mediated through language in all types of situations in daily life"(ibid, p.12), it is more than obvious that mediation practices constitute an indispensable part of foreign language learning.

Mediation in the CEFR

Introduced in a subsection of the fourth chapter of the Common European Framework for languages(CEFR,2001), with the title "Language Use and Language User" and viewed, together with reception, production and interaction, as the language activities language users are asked to perform while using language in a communicative way, mediation is defined as a process during which "the language user is not concerned to express his/her own meanings, but simply to act as an intermediary between interlocutors who are unable to understand each other directly-normally (but not exclusively) speakers of different languages" (ibid:87).A distinction is made between *oral* and *written mediation*, and reference is made to the mediation strategies which language users engage in order to act effectively as mediators, including *planning* (development of background knowledge, preparation of a glossary, consideration of the interlocutors' needs and selection of a unit of interpretation), *execution* (processing of input and formulating the last chunk simultaneously in real time), *evaluation* (checking congruence of two versions and checking consistency of usage) and *repair* (consulting dictionaries, thesaurus, experts).

Mediation in the KPG exams

Being the first examination battery to include mediation by testing test takers' ability to mediate (Stathopoulou, 2009, p.11), the KPG examination battery adopts a different viewpoint of mediation, in absolute congruence with that proposed by Dendrinos. By defining mediation "as a purposeful practice, aiming at the interpretation of (social) meanings which are then

to be communicated/relayed to others when they do not understand a text or a speaker fully or partially" (2006, p.12), Dendrinou distinguishes it from professional translation or interpretation, which are highly specialized activities and do not entail the "informal interpretation", inherent in mediation. In mediation practices, the mediator is requested to make decisions on the meaning of the text and accordingly paraphrase, summarize or combine information so as to relay the intended meaning. This gives him/her an active role in the process of communication, stressing the interactive nature of mediation practices. Moreover, Dendrinou (ibid) informs us about the different types of mediation. Apart from *verbal mediation*, in which a verbal text is used as a source text, *visual mediation* is also possible by providing information in exclusively visual form through the use of charts, pictures, etc., or even through the use of a multimodal text encompassing both the visual and the acoustic element. Furthermore, reference is made to *cultural mediation* and a distinction is made between *intracultural* and *intercultural* mediation, the former having to do with relaying information between speakers sharing the same language, whereas the latter entails relaying information to people across different languages and/or cultures. Particular emphasis is placed on "the necessary literacy level and the skills to understand (multimodal) texts in Greek" (ibid, p.15), namely knowledge and awareness (life world knowledge, awareness of the grammar of the visual design and intercultural awareness), literacies (school, social and practical) communicative competences (linguistic, sociolinguistic, strategic and discourse) and cognitive and social skills (operational, receptive, productive and interactive) (ibid, p.22). Adding to the above, Stathopoulou (2009, p.25) makes reference to mediation specific strategies, employed only in mediation tasks with the aim to make the mediation process more successful. These include selecting information relevant to the communicative purpose of the mediation task, excluding, adding, combining and reorganizing information, paraphrasing of information appearing in the source text, using synonyms, providing the gist of the source text, avoiding word-for-word translation (Stathopoulou, 2009; Dendrinou and Stathopoulou, 2010).

Mediation and young learners' writing

Being a real life task, emerging from "the needs of the Greek EFL learner who lives in Greece and is often required to function in the two languages alongside one another" (Drossou, 2003, p.476), even in the immediate context of their classroom, mediation is a primarily interactive practice and lends itself to its exploitation in the teaching and learning of writing as a highly communicative task. What is more, by supplying learners with the necessary skills to communicate effectively in settings outside the classroom context, mediation increases learners' motivation and promotes their autonomy.

Moreover, by making explicit reference to contextual factors, written mediation tasks can add to the element of contextualization in the writing process and function as an effective way of familiarizing young learners with various types of written texts and raising their awareness of genres, by making them realize that "the more the textual and linguistic choices respond to contextual rules, the more socially meaningful the text is" (Dendrinou, 2010). Adding to that, the mediation strategies that learners employ while engaging themselves in mediation practices, namely planning, execution, evaluation and repair, as ways to process information and establish meaning, seem to comply with the writing model proposed by Hayes & Flower (1980, p.29), which identifies the nature of the sub-processes of the writing process, underlines its recursive nature and seems to cater for

learners' individual differences. In this way, mediation constitutes a tool to guide learners towards viewing writing as a problem solving process, which requires them to plan what is to be written, generate new ideas, as well as transform and revise what has been already written. What is more, being a task that integrates both reading and writing, mediation caters for integration of skills and involves learners in engaging reading strategies, too, namely activating prior knowledge, skimming, understanding the gist of the source text. The fact, however, that the source text is in learners' mother tongue constitutes a useful tool, rather than a hindrance, since in tasks involving translation or paraphrasing, such as mediation tasks, learners are encouraged to "find a way of expressing their meaning within the limit of their competence in the target language" (Atkinson, 1987, p.245), and thus develop their communicative competence. Even more, such a use of L1 "reduces anxiety and enhances the affective environment for learning, takes into account sociocultural factors, facilitates incorporation of learners' life experiences and allows for learner-centered curriculum development" (Auerbach, 1993, p.8). It may, as well, provide additional support in cases where young learners' world life experience may be limited and cater, thus, for a sense of security in the learning environment, which, as Drosatou (2009, p. 8) argues, is particularly important for young learners.

The research questions

Despite its indisputably prominent role in communication and its introduction in the EFL Greek context through the work of Dendrinos et al (1986), mediation has been either neglected or underestimated and the research conducted in the field of foreign language learning is rather limited, due to the prevalence of the "English-only" paradigm based on monolingual practices of teaching (Stathopoulou, 2009), since "the perceived superiority of the English language above all other languages led to the assumption that only English should be used in the process of English language teaching and learning" (Voidakos, 2007, p.12). Such a practice, however, as well as the inadequacies in the way writing is taught and practised in the English primary classroom, constituted the incentive for the proposal of a supplementary teaching plan. It was deemed by the writer that the existing writing tasks, which explicitly focus on accuracy of form rather than on communication of meaning, fail to effectively promote learners' communicative competence and autonomy. Despite the fact that in several cases they are contextualized, integration of skills is catered for and topics of interest are dealt with, the development of learners' plurilingual awareness is not effectively developed, attributed to a great extent to the limited exploitation of learners' mother tongue. Finally, the decision to implement the instruction of mediation strategies in the Greek primary writing classroom was supported by the writer's agreement with Dendrinos and Stathopoulou's (2010) point of view that mediation strategies are indeed "teachable" and "systematic training for mediation performance leads to positive results". Intrigued by all the above, the present writer decided to focus on written mediation and explore the potential effect it may have on the enhancement of young learners' writing performance. Apart from this, it was sought to examine its relation to affective factors inherent in the process of teaching and learning and determine the extent to which it can increase learners' positive feelings. Finally, it was the writer's aspiration to take advantage of the proposed teaching innovation and address an additional parameter, namely the compatibility of the proposed plan with the educational context of the Greek primary school, the 6th grade in particular. To that end, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Can written mediation tasks be implemented in a way so as to help young learners of English improve their writing performance?

2. Can this implementation have a positive effect on young learners' feelings and attitudes towards the teaching of writing?
3. Is it possible for written mediation tasks to be effectively performed by primary school EFL learners, if we take into consideration not only the distinct nature of the specific tasks, but also the level of competence of the specific group of learners?

Method and instrumentation

In order for these research questions to be experimentally explored, a supplementary syllabus for the implementation of written mediation practices in the 6th grade of the Greek primary school was designed. The action research method was selected and a combination of methods of collecting information was adopted. The tools used in the specific research are the following:

- An entry writing task, which functioned as a test and was taken by the learners at the beginning of the research in order to specify their level of writing performance. Learners were asked to write a letter to a friend of theirs to provide him/her with information about where to go and what to do in order to have fun while visiting their area during the Easter holidays. The choice of the specific writing task was made taking into account not only the specific learners' preferences for writing texts of this type, but also their familiarization with it.
- An exit writing task at the end of the study so as to determine any possible changes and improvements in comparison to the entry test. Learners were asked to take a similar writing test, the only difference being that, in that case, they were provided with a Greek text from which they had to relay the necessary information.
- A needs analysis questionnaire administered at the beginning of the study and an evaluation questionnaire after the proposed teaching plan was implemented, through which learners' attitudes towards writing in general, and towards mediation practices in particular, as well as their beliefs about what constitutes good writing practices for them, were traced both at the beginning and at the end of the study respectively.
- Four written mediation lessons during which learners were engaged in written mediation tasks especially designed by the writer so as to comply with the learners' interests and previous knowledge in terms of topic and types of texts, too. More specifically, in these four lessons, learners were asked to write a letter of advice to a friend of theirs, a list of rules for safe driving to appear in their school newspaper, an article about Greek Guinness record holders and a letter to a friend providing information on a topic. Throughout the implementation of the study the same procedure was followed in all the experimental lessons. In the first two writing sessions, particular emphasis was placed on the planning stage of writing, while towards the last sessions learners were given the freedom to go through all the stages of the writing process, namely planning, drafting, evaluation and editing, themselves, with the teacher acting more as a monitor and facilitator.

Participants

The research was conducted in a state primary school in a small town in western Greece and the focus was placed on the 6th grade learners. The group of subjects participating in this study was 20 students, ten boys and ten girls, the majority of whom were monolingual, since their mother tongue was Greek, while three of them were bilingual speakers of both Greek and Albanian.

Procedure of the written mediation lessons

Each lesson was divided in four stages, namely planning, drafting, reviewing and editing, and it was meant to last approximately 50 minutes. Moreover, group work was encouraged, thus helping learners practise cooperation skills and promote their interpersonal intelligence. During the planning stage, in an attempt to activate learners' background knowledge, the researcher initiated a discussion on mediation tasks. Following that, in order to raise their awareness of the task requirements in terms of communicative purpose, genre, register and style, the writer invited learners to read the Greek source text and decide which pieces of information provided in it were relevant to the task in hand. After prioritizing important information, learners were encouraged to rely on their existing knowledge and prepare a glossary by writing down in English as many words as possible. Feedback was provided by both the learners and the researcher, who wrote their answers on the board. Throughout this stage, learners were encouraged to paraphrase words or phrases for which they faced difficulty in finding their equivalent English and were thus helped to develop their how-to-learn strategies and autonomy.

The drafting stage, during which learners were asked to use the information and knowledge gained in the previous tasks and write their first draft, aimed at helping learners first organize and group their ideas and then proceed to the actual production of written discourse, as well as establish lexical cohesion in their texts.

In the next stage, learners were engaged in evaluation practices by asking groups to exchange drafts and comment on each other's text, using a list of criteria, which was based on their own answers to the questions in the tasks of the planning stage. Once this was completed, each group revised their piece of writing by taking into consideration their peers' comments and contributed to the improved quality of their final text. Finally, during the last stage of the lesson, namely editing, learners were asked to check on "grammar errors or the mechanics of writing, namely spelling, punctuation and the like" (Calfoglou, 2004, p.210).

Qualitative evaluation of the learners' writings

Apart from a analysis of the collected data, it was considered important to make a comparative evaluation of the written texts produced by the learners at the beginning and at the end of the study and investigate whether and to what extent the mediation practices the learners were engaged in the second case improved their actual writing performance.

To begin with, as it can be seen in Table 1, all groups exhibited an overall marked improvement between the two writing tests. What is remarkable to state is that differentiation is evident with regard to their language performance, since all five groups scored better in the exit than in the entry writing test. The language produced was, to a considerable extent, determined by the Greek source text and accounted for the better quality of the texts produced in the second case. Apart from the simple grammatical structures learners used, as expected due to their proficiency level, more complex structures, such as conditionals and subordinate clauses, which were present in the Greek source text, appeared in the exit tests, too. Moreover, the better organization of ideas, which is attributed to the learners' following the organization of the source text, as well as the extensive use of cohesive devices in the exit writings, added to their coherence and cohesion.

Table 1: Learners' performance in the writing test

	Before the intervention	After the intervention
Group A	5/10	7/10
Group B	7/10	9/10
Group C	6,5/10	9,5/10
Group D	5/10	6,5/10
Group E	6/10	8/10

Another characteristic that exemplifies the correlation between both the written mediation practices implemented and the reading source text used, and learners' improvement in writing is the wide range of vocabulary, as well as the descriptive language appearing in all the texts produced by the learners while mediating. Finally, the amount of ideas used from the Greek text can account for the increase in length of each group's written product. Although such a fact does not necessarily entail better performance, it may have contributed to the learners' increase in the time of engagement and practice in the writing process, and enhanced the production of written discourse.

Quantitative analysis of learners' questionnaires

After the implementation of the proposed teaching plan, learners were asked to complete a post-study questionnaire, which functioned as an evaluation and aimed at tracing whether and to what extent there has been an alteration in their attitudes towards writing, due to the written mediation practices they were engaged in.

The analysis of their answers showed that they adopted a positive mentality towards the way writing was implemented in the classroom since they all reported that they liked the specific writing lessons either enough or very much, as shown in Figure 1.

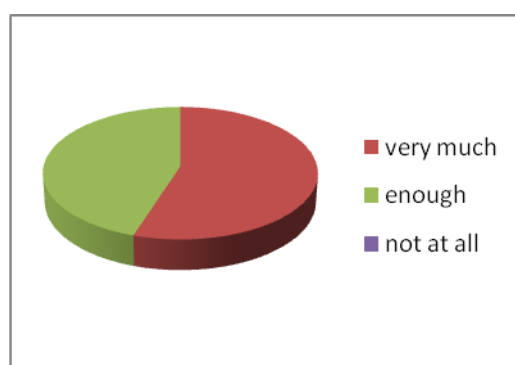


Figure 1: How much did you like the English lesson you participated in?

There was a slight increase in the percentage of learners who reported that they found writing very easy and very much fun and believed that the mediation lessons led to changes in several parameters of their writing performance (Table 2). More specifically, more than half of the learners reported that after the intervention they very strongly believe they could write well in English. There seemed to be a slight increase in the percentage of

learners who believed that they could plan their writing and choose the correct genre. It is also most important to point out that a high percentage of learners (60%) seemed to value the contribution of the written mediation lessons to the enhancement of their self-confidence, due not only to the whole procedure followed in the lessons, but also to the use of the Greek source reading text, which has proven to positively affect it in various ways.

Apart from its impact in terms of the affective factors mentioned above, it became evident that for a high percentage of learners (75%) relying on the Greek reading source text to write in L2 produced positive results in terms of production of ideas, and helped them express meaning more effectively, reduce their mistakes in grammar (35%), punctuation and spelling, as well as enrich their vocabulary (80%), as presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Learners' evaluation of their writing performance

	Before the intervention	After the intervention
Write well	10%	55%
Plan writing	55%	65%
Choose correct genre	15%	30%
Think of ideas	50%	75%
Use nice vocabulary	45%	80%
Make less grammar mistakes	15%	35%

Discussion of the findings

Improvement of the learners' writing performance

As it became evident from the qualitative evaluation of the groups' writings while they were engaged in written mediation, all the groups produced coherent texts, exhibiting markedly positive differentiations in terms of grammatical structures, vocabulary, cohesion and coherence, as well as communication of meaning. Such a fact indicated a significant improvement in their actual writing performance and, thus, substantiates the first research question, namely, that the implementation of written mediation tasks can help young learners improve their writing performance. This is further supported by the quantitative analysis of the learners' answers to the questionnaires, which clearly depicts the positive shift in learners' feelings and attitudes towards writing since almost all of them highly value the contribution of written mediation to the enhancement of their ability to think of ideas more easily, organize their writing better, improve their vocabulary and make fewer mistakes in terms of grammar, spelling and punctuation.

Positive attitudes towards writing

Another point that the research findings revealed is that the learners' attitudes towards writing were positively affected by the application of the mediation writing tasks, providing evidence for the verification of the second research question of this study. More specifically, learners adopted a positive mentality towards these techniques and highly ranked their positive impact on affective factors. They felt more confident about writing and less worried about making mistakes, their perceptions of writing improved and their willingness to engage themselves in writing was increased.

Moreover, engagement in real-life communicative activities led to the enhancement of learners' positive feelings since, by being encouraged to develop their cognitive and metacognitive strategies through paraphrasing, using synonyms, translating and relying on their existing resources in L1 in order to express meaning, they were helped to become more autonomous in their learning. Similarly, learners' critical thinking was developed and their sophisticated choices about which pieces of information to relay and prioritize functioned as an additional boost in their positive attitudes towards writing since their contribution to both the writing process and the written product was highly acknowledged.

What is also important is that, by helping them make comparisons between the two languages and understand the differences in expressing meaning between them in sociolinguistic terms, written mediation enabled learners to realize the value of effectively using L1 while learning a foreign language. It should, also, be mentioned that learners' collaboration and peer feedback during the written mediation tasks had an additional positive impact on the learners' attitudes towards writing.

Applicability of written mediation practices in primary school education.

It is the present researcher's belief that the whole discussion presented in the above sections constitutes sufficient evidence for the applicability of written mediation practices in the Greek primary classroom. Both the qualitative and the quantitative analysis of the research results indicate a strong possibility for the integration of written mediation practices in the syllabus of English in Greek state primary school and seem to further support Dendrinos and Stathopoulou's (2010) suggestion to ELT professionals to design tasks that aim to have learners practise the role of mediator. It also points to the fact that practices, which foster the exploitation of learners' L1, as well as any possible foreign languages they use to communicate, can and should be implemented since "a monolingual approach to ESL is rejected not just because it may slow the acquisition of English but because it denies learners the right to draw on their language resources and strengths" (Auerbach, 1993, p.10).

Conclusions

It has become apparent that the present study has offered adequate evidence about the correlation between written mediation practices and young learners' writing performance and can constitute an ideal way of satisfying learners' communicative and writing needs, which, as Dendrinos (2003, p.153) pinpoints, "are created in the learners native social environment and are built around certain types of language activity which require simultaneous, consecutive or sequential use of the native and target languages". More specifically, it was proved that the whole process was of benefit for the young learners of the primary school. Their writing performance was enhanced, as exemplified by the improved quality of their written products, which were more coherent, better organized and, to a great extent, free of mistakes in terms of grammar and punctuation. Their vocabulary was also enriched, while they were given the opportunity to make comparisons between languages. Additionally, learners' attitudes towards writing were positively affected since they felt more confident during the writing process and even weaker learners were quite motivated. Their autonomy in learning was developed since they took advantage of the source reading text and managed to rely on their own linguistic resources in order to communicate as language users, making thus the teacher's intervention unnecessary.

It should, however, be pointed out that, given the recent introduction of mediation in the Greek EFL context, further research can be proposed. Apart from verbal texts on which the present study focused, it would be worth investigating the use of multimodal texts in the written mediation process

and cater thus for the integration of technology, which undoubtedly constitutes one of young learners' major interests. It is believed by the present researcher that various technological applications, such as YouTube, blogs, Facebook, e-mails or voice-mails, can replace the traditional verbal text and constitute a valuable tool for the practice of young learners' mediation skills. Another topic worthy exploring could be to examine the extent to which relaying information from reading source texts in other foreign languages, which young learners are taught at school (e.g. French, German), can have an effect on their writing performance, and whether it can match the characteristics of multilingual classrooms and cater for the needs of learners coming from various linguistic and cultural contexts.

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