

Creative activities in the Greek EFL Classroom

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to highlight cross-curricular activities and projects that are employed creatively in Greek schools, following the implementation of the cross-curricular approach to teaching English in the public sector. The revised curriculum (2003) provides pupils with increased awareness of multicultural/multilingual aspects of language learning. In addition to the development of literacy and communicative competence, it focuses on the multi-faceted development of children and the formulation of social attitudes by exploiting information from various subjects.

Thus, children work toward completing projects that combine the learning of English with other subjects, such as History, Geography, Art, Computers, P.E., Science, etc., in a creative, learner-centred process of active participation. Pupils are encouraged to do their own research and develop autonomy. Moreover, the study of English becomes more motivating, as it is presented in a meaningful context. Various methods are employed, so as to ensure differentiation and recognition of individual differences among learners.

Experiences from the past and suggestions for the future form a blend of projects and activities that have proved to be enjoyable and creative engagements with children during the English language lesson. The content-based study of English promotes communicative competence as it becomes a process of discovering the world, interacting with the local society, and learning how to learn in a pleasant and creative atmosphere. Examples of cross-curricular activities involve dramatization, educational games, turning texts into pictures, using new technologies and educational sites (e.g. “Xenios”).

Introduction

In the Greek educational system, English is taught in Primary schools for four years (grades 3 to 6). The introduction of English in grade 3 took place in 2003-04, but the language has been taught in Primary education since 1993 – although it had been introduced as a pilot scheme even earlier. In secondary education it is taught for another six years, in junior and senior high schools.

Educational approaches to teaching English in the Greek EFL classroom are now based on the principles governing the new Revised Curriculum of the English Language (2003).¹ The creative activities proposed encourage pupils to learn "how to learn". Therefore, teachers should not only be careful about how to teach, but also about how *not* to teach: this means that learners need to be activated towards conquering knowledge through participation and discovery, in a safe and pleasant educational environment.

The advantage of the cross-curricular approach is that it aims at combining information from various subjects. Thus, teaching English does not focus simply on skills development and knowledge acquisition but on the overall development of children's personality. In this respect, English as a subject is now treated on a par with other subjects taught at school, as it offers a culturally different perspective on a variety of issues related to pupils' lives.

1. The Revised Curriculum of the English Language

According to the Revised Curriculum of the English Language, which is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages,² the objectives of teaching English in the Greek public sector are:

A. *Literacy*. This aim concerns the acquisition of knowledge of the form, structure and functions of the foreign language, as well as the development of skills. Children get involved in oral and written exercises with a view to acquiring and exploiting information, knowledge and attitudes, while also learning to structure, organize and express their thoughts in every communicative situation. At the same time, they are trained in the correct usage of the graphemic and phonemic system of the English language, through selected activities.

B. *Plurilingualism*. This objective refers to the discovery of similarities and differences between languages and aims to acquaint learners with linguistic diversity and its function in different contexts. In this sense, a dynamic relationship with other languages is developed, as pupils practice skills involving the parallel use of mother tongue and foreign language – e.g. reading or listening to instructions in Greek and expressing a speech act in English. An example of a "multilingual" exercise from the *Funway* series used in the Greek primary school involves a listening comprehension exercise in which pupils listen to five children introducing themselves in Greek, English, French, German and Italian, and try to understand and write down each child's name, country and city.

C. *Pluriculturalism*. This term pervades all forms of communication and refers to the familiarization of learners with linguistic as well as cultural diversity -- the realization that there exist similar and equivalent social attitudes pertaining to different peoples of the world. By learning the linguistic code of a people, learners develop respect of cultural peculiarities and the cultural context of different countries and civilizations and accept this information as something that enriches their intellectual and spiritual world.³ In the *Funway* series again, there are "pluricultural" texts (e.g. "Oscar lives in Peru...", "Fernando is from Spain..." or "In Bangkok, the market is the river itself...", etc.), in which language teaching becomes more meaningful, as it is directly related to conveying geographical, historical or environmental knowledge (e.g. matching exercises in which pupils read encyclopaedic information about certain animals and then match them with the pictures or definitions provided).

The philosophy pervading the teaching of English in the Greek public sector is summarized in the following learner-centred approaches:

A. "Learn how to learn".

B. Prepare for "life-long learning".

Within this framework, conquering attitudes for life becomes the long-term target, within the broader environment of a changing, multilingual and multicultural community. The methodology of foreign language teaching is blended with various subjects, in a cross-curricular approach, a process of active participation aiming at the development of methods of discovering, evaluating and processing information. From this aspect, learners become researchers involved in action programmes targeted at covering their needs both at school and in their social interactions.

Methodologically, a variety of alternative teaching approaches is proposed, based on consolidation, research and creation and aiming at providing knowledge in a pleasant and creative environment. Particularly in day-long schools,⁴ this approach has become more feasible with the development of small projects as well as role-play/dramatization, reading stories, learning traditional songs from Anglophone countries, playing educational games, watching educational videos, etc.

2. Teaching Approaches

A. Flexible learning

Cross-curricular activities respond to Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, and therefore they cover learners' needs – whether they are the linguistic type, the spatial, musical, kinesthetic, logical/mathematical, interpersonal or intrapersonal. The additional benefit is that alternative activities and forms of teaching also encourage learners to discover their different talents and inclinations.

In order to sustain pupils' interest and motivation, it is essential to change activities frequently. Another useful technique is to combine compulsory activities (telling all pupils to do a certain minimal part of the task) with optional material (for those who understand or have time and wish to do more). Furthermore, incorporating music, movement, dramatization, etc. into language teaching contributes to the creation of a relaxed and positive atmosphere, in which the teacher essentially facilitates the learning process, guiding children to meaningful communication. Examples of combined activities include:

- Writing and listening.
- Listening to songs and singing as a chorus.
- Reading stories and dramatizing them.
- Watching educational videos (e.g. documentaries, Aesop's fables, etc.) and discussing afterwards or writing a summary.

Audio-visual means – particularly videotapes – present realistic aspects of life, involve learners in stimulating conversations, and also offer variety and entertainment.⁵

On the whole, the teacher should provide weaker learners, too with opportunities to feel the joy of success by stimulating their interest with exercises and activities that are suitable for a mixed-ability class – which, for instance, is the case in day-long schools. Group work is ideal, as it enables students to learn from one another, practice oral fluency and feel less intimidated.⁶

B. Lesson planning

A teacher has to be patient and calm. However hard that may be in a class of vivacious young learners, it is essential to keep in mind the impact that the teacher's behaviour can have. Pupils often model their own behaviour on their pedagogues and that alone can be a frustrating element. The teacher ought to benefit from that by planning his lesson carefully, and incorporating gestures, miming, etc., so as to create a more humanistic environment. Bringing to class flash cards, magazine or newspaper clips, tapes, realia, etc. can also be helpful.

Example

Present Continuous

- What am I doing now? (T mimes slicing, chopping, stirring, etc.)
- You are cooking!

While planning the lesson, it is useful to bear in mind that alternating “stir” with “settle” activities is an important method of controlling tempo.⁸ For instance, dictation and writing exercises help to maintain quiet in the classroom. In contrast, songs, role-play, choral responses and educational games are more lively activities. Above all, story-telling is a very important engagement, especially for primary learners.⁹

C. The role of translation

Translation improves learners' understanding of the differences between English and Greek, while it also sharpens their comparative skills and familiarizes them with intercultural aspects of language learning. Personalizing sentences to be translated is a useful method of engaging learners personally and helping them to feel they are related to as individuals.

Example

Present Simple

Stelios visits his grandparents every weekend.

Despina watches cartoons every afternoon.

D. Dramatization

Experience suggests that only entertaining activities – or those that involve pupils' background can motivate them and promote learning. As a rule, creative activities develop pupils' automatized learning.¹⁰ Communicative activities reflect real-life English, as opposed to “classroom English”, a term describing the old model that emphasized learning grammar rules instead of using the language in communicative settings.

Example (Giving directions)

Dramatizing an extract from *Funway 2* (Primary School coursebook, Grade 5)

- Excuse me, where's the headmaster's office?
- Go straight ahead, turn left and then right. The headmaster's office is next to the library.
- ...

E. Cross-curricular activities

Cross-curricular activities promote learner autonomy as pupils get used to doing research and completing projects. *How* learners are involved in the learning process is more important than *what* they are taught.¹¹ Children participate in authentic situations involving experimenting, co-operating, suggesting solutions and verifying them. In this way, they develop their social skills and abilities at school, while the role of the teacher is to facilitate their research. Dialogue, conversation and collaboration are core elements of the cross-curricular approach. As D. Johnson and R. Johnson state, co-operation contributes more to children's mental and emotional development than competition or individual work, while it also promotes relationships between pupils and between pupils and teacher, thus contributing to the creation of an appropriate pedagogic ambience.¹²

In public primary schools, emphasis is more on teaching than testing, while pupils' progress is assessed by means of projects and a personal portfolio.¹³ Projects are usually based on group work on various topics reflecting children's needs and inclinations. In this respect, projects are ideal for promoting co-operation in class, while they also connect school with society. What is more, when pupils are involved in meaningful activities they are better motivated, as they can identify with roles and settings that are relevant to their lives and interests, particularly when they are asked to do something or act. As House states, all these principles need to be considered by the teacher when he prepares his teaching material.¹⁴

Example 1

Bong's story

Pupils are assigned roles and mime voices as they dramatize an extract from the story with the aliens, at the end of each unit of their book (*Funway 1*, Grade 4).

As a follow-up, they are assigned the following exercise:

Imagine what houses look like on Bong's planet. Draw Bong's house and write the names of its rooms and furniture.

This activity combines writing (*Language*) with drawing (*Art*), while it also consolidates previously taught vocabulary. At the same time, it offers learners with artistic skills an opportunity to participate in the lesson.¹⁵

Example 2

Bilingual newspaper

According to Raimes, "writing is a valuable part of any language course", as it reinforces learners' structure, grammar and vocabulary acquisition.¹⁶ In co-operation with their Greek and English language teachers, pupils are assigned to write short articles, jokes, announcements, songs, poems, cartoons, etc. The "editors" collect the material and a bilingual newspaper is compiled, which can then be sold by the pupils. The project may also feature an interview from the local authorities (e.g. the Mayor).

Example 3

Tourist guide

Pupils work towards compiling a tourist guide of their area. They talk about the sights and places of interest that will be included in the guide, take photos or look for information about certain monuments, etc. and then write their own articles.

3. New technologies and language learning

The incorporation of computers into the educational process has facilitated the implementation of the modern pedagogic principle of the cross-curricular approach that inter-relates school subjects, thus surpassing the traditional attitude to knowledge. Using new technologies in class increases children's interest, as it offers learner autonomy and improves pupils' research and learning strategies. In addition, the teacher can adjust his lesson to the different needs of students. The Internet in particular is ideal for finding information and completing projects, while it also increases children's intercultural understanding. Learning a foreign language can therefore be

enhanced with the use of new technologies, which transform it from an intensive and time-consuming activity to an exciting experience.

Examples of cross-curricular activities involving new technologies and English language teaching are presented below:

Example 1

Physical Education

- A. Pupils surf the Internet and find information about a sport from an Anglophone country, e.g. cricket, golf, etc. and then a game is organized at school, with the help of the P.E. teacher.
- B. In co-operation with the P.E. teacher, choreography is developed from an English song (e.g. “Hockey-Cockey” – or a traditional song from an Anglophone country).

Example 2

Pupils copy a text from their coursebook in a *Word* file and run spell check. Electronic word processing is not a “virtual” activity, because it allows pupils to complete their assignment in a more convenient interface and either co-operate or work individually, at their own pace, forming and formatting the content of their written assignments. Moreover, they learn to read faster and develop their skills in different reading techniques (scanning, skimming, etc.).

Example 3

Pupils get an e-mail address and then with the help of their teacher they send electronic messages to each other or to pupils from another school of their area (or even from another country).

Example 4

Learners use on-line dictionaries (for example the English-Greek and Greek-English dictionary at www.in.gr) to translate words/phrases from English into Greek and vice versa.

Example 5

The educational site “Xenios” (<http://xenios.cti.gr>)

This website offers a virtual tour of Europe, language practice and skills development exercises. It is available in three languages (English, French and German) and it is based on “a holistic approach for the application of Information and Communication Technologies in a classroom setting through an educational scenario-framework on the theme of a virtual trip to a foreign country”.¹⁷ The activities have been designed and divided into “phases” of the trip (“at the airport”, “at the hotel”, etc.) and teachers’ focus on each phase may vary, depending on the theme or the level of the pupils. In addition, English language learners may explore *Xenios* and “visit” London’s sights, e.g. the British Museum and its famous galleries. As a follow-up, pupils can write a short composition relating their impressions (connection with *Geography, History and Art*).

Activities of this kind enhance pupils’ cultural horizons and conform to the principles of intercultural education. According to Kim, the intercultural person “represents a type of person whose cognitive, affective, and behavioral characteristics are not limited but are open to growth beyond the psychological parameters of his or her own culture...”.¹⁸

In general, the various multimedia applications that combine text, sound, graphics, pictures, animation, etc. are very attractive, while their built-in feedback makes them ideal for autonomous learning. However, it is the teacher’s responsibility to present activities to children in an organized and orchestrated way.

Example 6

Pupils find information about a British or American writer, artist/politician – or a city, area, etc.

Some of the Internet search engines pupils can use are:

Greek engines: In.gr (<http://www.in.gr>), Phantis (<http://www.phantis.com>), Evresi (<http://www.evresi.gr>), Go Greece (<http://www.gogreece.net>)

Foreign engines: Google (<http://www.google.com>), Altavista (<http://www.altavista.com>), Ask Jeeves (<http://www.ask.com>), Yahoo (<http://www.yahoo.com>)

The advantage of using computers to teach English is that the computer can assume different roles.¹⁹ The keyword is “interactive”. Computers can receive and provide data; they can provide information and they can also play the teacher’s role in correcting pupils’ mistakes, for instance. The use of multimedia allows computers to talk to children or even communicate with them on a name-to-name basis, through specially designed software.

Moreover, the internet offers immense opportunities, such as getting direct information about various issues from digital libraries or from educational sites or portals like those of BBC or CNN, etc. Thus children approach knowledge through more pleasant stimuli and learning becomes more creative and enjoyable.

4. Educational games

As stated in the revised Curriculum, educational games offer learners of all levels the opportunity to participate in the lesson, as even weaker pupils feel motivated to contribute to the success of their team. Educational games create competition in class and are therefore a significant alternative activity.²⁰ Apart from that, they usually combine language activities with movement (TPR), so they are more exciting. Games help children to express themselves, discover information in a pleasant way, offer and receive, learn how to organize and co-operate and, finally, identify with roles and situations. In addition, pupils develop their personality by interacting with their environment and learning how to communicate in various manners. Scheuerl characterized learning through play as the superior level of learning.²¹

A variety of games are used in the Greek classroom: *Hangman*, *Simon says*, *Taboo*, card games, puzzles, etc. The following game is a variation I have used successfully with Greek Primary learners.

Example

X-O-X (“Triliza”)

ticket εισήρηιο X		
	shirt πουκάμισο O	

The class is divided into two teams (e.g. boys – girls). Pupils come to the board and write an English word in one of the boxes, either as part of their spelling assignment from the previous lesson or for purposes of vocabulary revision. If they write the word correctly, they are allowed to write the sign of their team (X or O) in the same box. The level of difficulty can be increased if we also ask pupils to pronounce and translate the word before they are allowed to “score”. Then a pupil from the second team comes and writes another word in another box, trying to prevent the opposite team from getting three wins in a row (horizontally, vertically or diagonally), and so on. If the pupils of a team cheat or are noisy, they miss a turn.

Language games help pupils appreciate the importance of knowing some basic vocabulary. This is especially true when they have to guess something. Therefore the objective is not simply to entertain children but also to enhance their vocabulary and improve their knowledge, through a process of active participation.²² Even though the language or the lesson itself may not be challenging on other occasions, the idea of “playing” holds their interest and keeps everyone participating.

5. Conclusions

With the new Revised Unified Curriculum we have moved a step forward, without claiming that we have invented the wheel. One of the main ideas pervading this paper is that, without ignoring the positive traits of conventional methodologies, the teaching of English as a Foreign Language in Greece gives now more emphasis to content-based, meaningful teaching and learning – a characteristic, traditionally, of English for Specific Purposes.

The double aim of English language education is on the one hand the development of communicative skills and on the other the acquisition of linguistic as well as interdisciplinary knowledge through meaningful projects and activities encouraging creativity and co-operation. This can be more easily achieved in schools of the public sector, where pupils are taught a variety of subjects. However, the implementation of the cross-curricular approach presupposes “extramural” activity as well and more time for research and contacts between the learners themselves or between learners and teachers or other people from the local society.

Cross-curricular activities teach pupils how to use the English language as a means and not only as an object of learning, in a communicative environment which is not an end in itself but the vehicle to conquer knowledge of the English language and culture.²³ The core idea is that children should get involved in instances of communication, adopt

roles and form attitudes on social issues (peace, justice, etc.), thus becoming better prepared for the exigencies of their future professional and social lives.

The way in which knowledge is approached becomes very important, as it influences the development of children's character. Therefore, teachers should be trained and assisted in their mission, which is to take into account pupils' prospective needs and teach them how to become active, energetic learners and citizens. In that sense, EFL overlaps with ESP -- thematically, at least -- as it covers pupils' needs in a more holistic way and develops their awareness of the inter-relatedness of school subjects and, ultimately, knowledge itself.

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NOTES

¹ Greek Government Gazette 304, B', 13-3-2003. It should be noted, though, that the cross-curricular approach had already been adopted before the Revised Unified Curriculum was officially implemented, while the same approach is also applied to the teaching of other subjects in Greek schools.

² Council of Europe. *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

³ R. Ellis, *The Study of Second Language Acquisition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 715.

⁴ See also: Greek Government Gazette 1471, B', 22-11-2002.

⁵ Cf. M. Allan, *Teaching English with Video* (London: Longman, 1991).

⁶ Natalie Hess, *Teaching Large Multi-level Classes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 130.

⁷ Amy B.M. Tsui, *Understanding Expertise in Teaching: Case Studies of ESL Teachers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 25-28.

⁸ Penny Ur, *A Course in Language Teaching: Practice and Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 216-18.

⁹ Cf. G. Ellis and J. Brewster, eds. *The Storytelling Handbook for Primary Teachers* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991).

¹⁰ Penny Ur, *A Course in Language Teaching: Practice and Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 19-20.

¹¹ See also: J. Chryshochoos, N. Chryshochoos and I. Thompson, *The Methodology of the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language with Reference to the Crosscurricular Approach and Task-Based Learning* (Athens: The Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs & The Pedagogical Institute, 2002).

¹² D. Johnson and R. Johnson, *Learning Together and Alone* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1994), p. 56.

¹³ As far as private foreign language centres (the so-called "frontistiria") are concerned -- a thriving business in Greece -- they are not particularly conscious of employing and implementing a cross-curricular approach and rather focus on preparing learners for the various examinations for language certificates. Their advantage is that they have more resources and are not limited to using a single coursebook (plus workbook and audio-cassette), as in the public sector. However, it should be mentioned that they are neither centrally guided nor officially assessed for the services they provide.

¹⁴ Cf. S. House, *An Introduction to Teaching English to Children* (Richmond Publishing, 1997).

¹⁵ Virginia French Allen, *Techniques and Resources in Teaching Vocabulary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 28-29.

¹⁶ Ann Raimes, *Techniques in Teaching Writing* (Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 3.

- ¹⁷ Margarita Dekoli, “Ekpaideytikes drastiriotites kai logismiko gia to mathima ton ksenon glosson sto scholeio” (Educational activities and software for the school subject of foreign languages), 1st Conference on New Technologies in Teaching: Educational Software and the Internet, Syros 11, 12, 13 May 2001).
- ¹⁸ Y. Kim, “Communicating Interculturally: Becoming Competent”, in L. Samovar & R. Porter (eds) *Intercultural Communication: A Reader* (Belmont, California, U.S.A.: Wadsworth, 1994), pp. 337-346.
- ¹⁹ Cf. R. P. Taylor (ed.) *The Computer in the School: Tutor, Tool, Tutee* (New York: Teacher’s College Press, 1980).
- ²⁰ Penny Ur, *A Course in Language Teaching: Practice and Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 228.
- ²¹ H. Scheuerl, *Das Spiel* (Weinheim und Basel, 1979), p. 186.
- ²² Virginia French Allen, *Techniques and Resources in Teaching Vocabulary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 52.
- ²³ Diane Larsen-Freeman, *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*, Second Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 137-142.

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