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## CONTENTS

Foreword .....	7
Bistra Andreeva, Snezhina Dimitrova, William J. Barry Production of Phrasal Prominence in English and Bulgarian .....	9
Nadezhda Atanassova Searching for the European Discourse .....	20
Galina Avramova Myth and Meaning in the Postmodern World: A Glimpse at Timothy Findley's <i>Not Wanted on the Voyage</i> .....	31
Alexandra Bagasheva The Globalizing Discourse(s) of Linguistics in the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century .....	36
Zelma Catalan The War of the Fictional Worlds, Or Why Do Aliens and Predators Have to Fight Each Other? .....	48
Gabriela Chefneux Interpersonal Communication in Institutional Setting: An analysis from the Interpersonal Function Language Perspective .....	59
Desislava Cheshmedzhieva "Cultural Oppression of the Indigenous White Group": Examples from British and Bulgarian Nationalistic Press .....	72
Liliana Coposescu Discourse Analysis of Communication in International Companies .....	82
Madeleine Danova Globalization and the Invention of Localities in Timothy Findley's <i>Pilgrim</i> .....	93
Maria Demace, Makrina Zafiri Teaching English and Interculturalism in Greek Schools .....	97
Geoffrey Gray Constructing Reality in Palestinian Discourse: the Strategic Function of Concessives .....	107
Zhivko Hristov A Translator's View on English Language Presentation of Bulgarian Cultural Heritage (Based on Texts from Museums of History) .....	117
Roumi Ilieva International Education as Response to Discourses of Globalization: the Case Study of an MED TESOL Program in a Canadian University .....	125

# TEACHING ENGLISH AND INTERCULTURALISM IN GREEK SCHOOLS

*Maria Demace*

Democretio University of Thrace

*Makrina Zafiri*

University of Thessaly

This paper focuses upon the teaching and incorporation of interculturalism in Greek education. It also studies the contents of the course books *Channel Your English* Elementary and Pre-Intermediate in an attempt to support the aforementioned statement. For the needs of this paper we used the content analysis method to record and interpret (both quantitatively and qualitatively) all intercultural accounts.

**Key words:** interculturalism, English language teaching, course books

## 1. INTRODUCTION

**1.1. The Unified By-Thematic Framework for the teaching of English as a foreign language and the Analytical School Curriculum (ASC)** ([http://www.pi-schools.gr/lessons/english/pdf/14depps Xenon Glosson-Agglika.pdf](http://www.pi-schools.gr/lessons/english/pdf/14depps%20Xenon%20Glosson-Agglika.pdf))

According to the Unified By-Thematic Framework concerning the English Language Study Program in Greece, the purpose of teaching a foreign language is the development of a student's linguistic ability to communicate effectively in a different linguistic and cultural environment. This means that the teaching of a foreign language – in this case the English language – aims at enabling students not only to communicate with native English language speakers but also with speakers of other languages who use English as a common code of communication, a sort of lingua franca.

With the teaching and learning of foreign languages an attempt is made to promote the concept of literacy, polyglotism and multiculturalism in Greek schools (P. Decree No. 304B/13-3-2003: 429).

Students are motivated to acquire the following skills:

- i. The acquisition, on the one hand, of the functions, structure and form of the foreign language and, on the other hand, the acquisition of the necessary skills which will enable students to develop their communicative abilities effectively, enabling them to participate actively within a social and professional context.
- ii. The promotion of multilingualism brings forward all those unique features of language and speech that different languages have, encouraging students to discover the similarities and differences among the different languages. It also promotes life long learning of foreign languages.

iii. Through the promotion of multiculturalism which governs all thematic fields of language learning and teaching and upon which linguistic, social and political codes of a foreign language are constructed, students are encouraged to respect and accept the "different", the "other", through the learning of one or more foreign languages. Thus students' contact with multiculturalism will allow them to formulate a multicultural awareness which will enable them to develop the following: a. firstly, an intercultural communicative ability; b. secondly, the ability to adapt their language (written and oral) to communicative circumstances, which will promote the cultural dimensions of the language; c. thirdly, to cater for any linguistic gaps and deficiencies that students may have by using paralinguistic and non-linguistic means in an attempt to communicate in the foreign language, and d. fourthly, the understanding of the different social attitudes, through the learning of a foreign language, which will draw students closer to the cultural environments which promote these attitudes

Multiculturalism and the teaching of English in Greek schools will, on the other hand, aid students in the understanding of the "other", which in this case is the culture or civilization of other nationals. This will further aid students in shaping a multicultural awareness which will guide them in the understanding and respect of the "other", the "different".

The Unified By-Thematic Framework in Greece concerning the teaching of English in junior high schools adopts the term "literacy" and the relationship that language has with the cultural and social environment within which it is spoken (Baynam in Hatzisavvides 2003).

The thematic field concerning "multiculturalism" states the following:

i. Students must familiarize themselves with the concept of multiculturalism exploiting at the same time the "different", the "other" (linguistically and culturally).

ii. Students should accept and respect the "other" by sensitizing themselves to the linguistic and cultural multiformity which exists in the world around them.

iii. The demarcation concerning the relationship of the following: multiculturalism – interculturalism and communicative competence, as well as, intercultural teaching. More specifically:

a. The ability of students to shape an intercultural awareness thus enabling themselves to acquire an intercultural communicative competence (P. D. 304B/13-3-2003: 430).

b. The main purpose of the ASC for the teaching of English as a foreign language lucidly states that multiculturalism should serve the needs of linguistic pluralism and the teaching of language in junior high schools.

c. Multiculturalism should come naturally with no constraints to Greek students as English, which is the language and the means for communication, will enable Greek students to come into contact not only with English speaking nations around the world but also with people who are not English speaking but who use English as a common code of communication. In this way students are aided in forming a multicultural awareness which will help them to accept and respect the

“different”, the “other”, the “distant” while at the same time students are guided in detecting and distinguishing those values which will aid them in shaping their national identity (P. D. 304 B/13-3-2003: 431).

In the third unit of the ASC, entitled “Multiculturalism and the skilful development of a multicultural awareness”, it is mentioned that students should be able to:

- i. understand social behaviours which are different to theirs and to respect them as equal;
- ii. to acquire a knowledge of the cultural environments of other nations and to understand and respect these cultural environments as they are considered an asset to a Greek student’s mental and psychological development (P. D. 304 B/13-3-2003: 445).

The content of the material which is to be taught is determined in the section under the heading “Indicative Thematic Units” and is the following:

Entertainment, songs, dances, pop stars. Films, magazines, film stars, a study of values and heroes. History, national holidays, traditional beliefs, traditional culture, adages, proverbs, shadow theatre.

The accompanying “Indicative Activities” propose:

The organization of traditional dances and national food or traditional garments or national and traditional music with the participation of people from other countries all using English as a common code of communication (it is highly recommended that teachers connect all the aforementioned with the teaching of geography, aesthetics, music and home economics). Myths or beliefs from Greece or English speaking countries, a comparison of the similarities and differences concerning the cultural elements of different countries and an attempt to concoct or to construct a myth with international characteristics thus making the structural and morphological elements of myths understood by a larger number of people.

The Unified By-Thematic Framework for the teaching of English as a foreign language and the Analytical School Curriculum for Greek junior high schools clearly have an intercultural orientation contrary to popular beliefs concerning the evaluation of Greek Study Programmes in general (Evangelou 2007: 168–187).

## **1.2. Intercultural Education**

The term “intercultural education” denotes the acceptance and identification of other cultures, their differences and similarities and the way they react to a stimulus (Conseil de l’Europe 1986). Interculturalism is a continuous search for the “other” the “foreign”, and aims at uniting an infinite number of cultures (Pissalides 2004: 191; Nesbitt 2004). For interculturalism it is not enough for one to show an interest in the similarities and differences of his cultural characteristics and those of the “other” even though it is a very important parameter in the learning process, nor is it enough to present the “other” within an abstract framework disconnected from

the daily experiential contact with the "other" (Plexousaki 2003: 33). Thus intercultural education focus upon the following four parameters:

- i. the formation of a positive perception of the differences between cultures
- ii. solidarity
- iii. the respect of other civilizations and the equality which exists among civilizations
- iv. teaching people about the values of peace (Kanakidou–Papagiannē 1994: 45).

## 2. TEACHING ENGLISH IN GREEK JUNIOR SCHOOLS: THE CASE OF *CHANNEL YOUR ENGLISH* AND INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION

### 2.1. The Role of the Course book

The school course books proposed by the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs are obligatory and are used by both teachers and students. According to Ahles (1996: 69), Greek school teachers have no alternative but to use the course books proposed by the Ministry. Course books have such a powerful influence in the Greek educational system that very often they replace the School Curriculum. Nevertheless it is true that the role played by a course book is very important as it helps shape a student's ideological identity.

The National Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs is responsible for the approval of course books which are used in all Greek schools. For the school year 2007–2008, teachers were free to choose the textbook(s), which they would like to use to teach English (Ministerial Decree – Protocol Numbers 93782/29-8-2007 and 93784/C<sub>2</sub> of 29-8-2007). A list of course books, published by different publishers, and written by different authors, were given to teachers to choose from.

Teachers are generally encouraged to take into account the following parameters when choosing the most appropriate course book for their students:

- i. The students' foreign language level.
- ii. The possibility of additional lessons for weaker students.
- iii. Students' motivation for learning a foreign language, as well as, their special interests.
- iv. Students' former learning experience.
- v. Their cognitive characteristics.
- vi. Their learning strategies.

Teachers are free to teach the course book they choose, as the course books are considered the means (the tools) which will facilitate their teaching. The teacher is encouraged to administer, organize and utilize the time to the advantage and needs of the students, while the course book functions as a general guide which will support the functions of his or her work. All course books have to abide to the principles of intercultural teaching and learning (Official Journal of the Hellenic Republic 1868/11-10-1999).

## **2.2. Research Methodology**

The hypothesis of this research was that school course books used in the teaching of English as a foreign language in Greek junior high schools, not only promote specific ideologies but also help shape students' personalities. Through the use of language, course books promote culture and more specifically the cultural elements of the country the language is spoken, in our case the English language. At the same time, they introduce elements of other cultures and languages (Dogancay-Aktuna 2005: 99–107; Göbel and Hesse 2004: 818–834).

For the needs of this research we used the qualitative analysis method (Bonides-Hontolidou 1995: 198).

## **2.3. Channel Your English Elementary and Intercultural Education**

In a similar paper (Koutalaki 2008) to the one presented here we find the following:

### **2.3.1. Origin/ Descent – Nationality – Cultural Background**

There are numerous accounts which refer to the origin/descent, nationality and cultural background of the characters which appear in the course book. Characters of English or Greek descent appear in the book, but there are characters of other nationalities which also appear. From the introductory unit, characters from the English speaking world appear in the course book, which come from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, The United States and Ireland, followed by their flags.

Countries in which English is spoken as a second language are also presented, including Greece. Nevertheless, very few characteristics of the Greek culture are presented here. The communicative framework of the course book is further reinforced with conversations, oral communications, e-mail messages, holiday experiences, and different expectations of the characters.

### **2.3.2. Languages**

From the introductory chapter students are introduced to the English world. The course book presents the English language as the most powerful; this is achieved through the use of a map upon which all English speaking countries are depicted. Other languages, as well as particular linguistic features of English speaking nations, such as the Scottish and the Irish are also mentioned.

Language learning and linguistic pluralism in the modern world are promoted, while characters which do not speak a foreign language are depicted negatively.

### **2.3.3. The “Other” – The “Different” – The Ancient Person**

The “other”, the “different” is represented in a multitude of ways. Twins, triplets and quadruplets with their unique genetic characteristics are presented. A pe-

culiar multicultural house and its broad-minded owner is also presented, but most importantly there is a comparison of the ancient and the modern way of life in Egypt, China, Athens, Sparta, Rome, and last but not least life in the U.S.A. in the 1900s is presented in detail.

#### **2.3.4. Occupations**

The course book presents texts which contribute positively to the teaching of social values. These texts present different kinds of occupations, usual or unusual ones. Students also learn about the different types of occupations which exist in contemporary society. They are informed about the social and legal equality that exists in society today as concerning a person's choice of occupation.

#### **2.3.5. Cultural Elements – Habits–Social Events–The Arts**

The course book attempts to encourage students to come into contact with people of different nationalities, cultures, civilizations, customs and traditions. It also attempts to present these cultures and civilizations so that Greek students become aware of the similarities and differences between their culture and the cultures of other people.

### **2.4. Channel Your English – Pre–Intermediate and Intercultural Education**

The quantitative findings concerning the course book Channel Your English – Pre–Intermediate are as follows:

Origin/Descent – Nationality – Cultural Background	18 points
Languages	6 points
The “Other” – the Ancient Person – the “Different”	13 points
Occupations	10 points
Cultural Elements – Habits – Social Events – The Arts	20 points

#### **2.4.1. Origin/ Descent – Nationality – Cultural Background**

The course book stresses that nationality is a determining factor in the formulation of the “different”, the “other” as an equal in society. The title of the first unit “A Window to the World” is representative of the contents of the unit. Young people from Italy, Scotland (p. 6) the Netherlands, Brazil, South Korea and Arabic countries are presented, including the habits of these countries (pp. 8, 9, 11, 30).

Students become acquainted with people living in major cities and towns around the world. Cities such as Geneva, London, Moscow, La Paz and Lhasa (pp. 40–43) are presented, giving students insights into their history as well as their daily life, thus setting an intercultural framework.

The differences between Australia and Poland are vivid, but Mick, who is an Australian, and Marek, who is Polish, are very dear friends and because of their friendship they seem to overcome the barriers set by their cultural and linguistic



differences. Students are also encouraged to use their imagination and to take a trip around the world to destinations such as the Barbados Islands, Venezuela, Brazil, France, Canada, China, Australia, Cyprus, Egypt, and Columbia (pp. 102–107).

Students are also informed about the environment in an attempt to educate and train them on how to contribute to its protection (pp. 50, 98–100). The course book further stresses that nations come close together in an attempt to cope with difficulties that arise from environmental problems.

#### *2.4.2. Languages*

Language learning is emphasized upon from the beginning of the course book (p. 6).

Unit five is dedicated to languages in general. More specifically the text on page thirty-four mentions not only the number of languages and dialects in existence today but also the dead languages which existed in the past, as well as, those which are gradually becoming extinct. The course book seems to take a positive stance towards “weaker” languages. The fact that some “dead” languages are once more spoken in Hawaii, Cornwall and Wales certainly shows auspicious prospects for the plight of these languages. In the revision unit students are asked how many foreign languages they speak and they are also asked to compare the Spanish word “hola”, which means “hello” in English, to “γεια σου” in Greek, and then students are asked to voice the same word in another eight languages (p. 35).

The language of the computer is also mentioned (pp. 36–37), English is the language of technology and information and this is what motivates students to learn it.

#### *2.4.3. The “Other” – The “Different” – The Ancient Person*

The “different” and the “other” are conceived of as something unexpected and are presented in ghost and mystery stories of green children and giant footprints in the snow on Mount Everest, as well as strange circles in the middle of cornfields in Surry (pp. 12–17).

Life in 2100 expresses both optimistic and pessimistic points of view. Mention is made of the environment and life in the year 2100 and students are encouraged to find solutions to environmental problems. In the same unit (p. 54) different kinds of devices and technological achievements of the future are presented. Students are sensitized to ecological problems and encouraged to ponder upon ways to save the planet.

Predictions about life in the future and more specifically in the 24<sup>th</sup> century are presented in the revision unit (p. 56) in which a text titled Fahrenheit 451 gives students a clear picture of the future. This picture according to Ray Bradbury is very disillusioning and aims at awakening students to an unpleasant reality.

The unusual appears, once more, in unit 11 (p. 72) in which unusual sport events such as underwater rugby and racing in a bathtub are presented. Students find these sports very entertaining and interesting and want to participate in similar sport events themselves.

Unit 14 (pp. 90–95) presents those features which differentiate one person from another. A research conducted in a magazine asks women to write about men and what they expect from their partners. The results of this research are presented in this unit. Students are also asked to answer a questionnaire which reveals their character. The I.Q. and the E.Q. of the students is measured and through this research students will be able to see if they can control their temper, emotions and actions. Respecting the “other” the “different” within the framework of equality is another intercultural element which is presented.

#### ***2.4.4. Occupations***

John Harrison, a bank manager, is being interviewed about his voluntary work in an animal shelter (p. 26). This text is presented to students in an attempt to teach them social values.

In unit six an attempt is made to connect a person’s work to the town or city where s/he prefers to practice. Mention is made of a bank manager’s occupation, a secretary’s job and a teacher’s job. In the revision units 5–8 an attempt is made to connect three people to their travel destinations. Three different nationals who are studying different subjects, and who have different interests and different plans for their careers are presented. According to their choices, they will either become bank managers, photographers or teachers. This presentation is conducted in an attempt to trigger students’ interests in specific work fields, irrespective of their cultural background, their sex or their national background.

Unit twelve presents dangerous occupations. The work of a rigger is presented here, the dangers of the occupation and their salaries are also presented (p. 78). The listening part of the unit also presents different kinds of occupations among which we find a person who works for a rescue team, a lorry driver and a vet (p. 79). The work of a manager’s assistant and an accountant is also presented in detail.

The texts of this course book aspire to guide students towards becoming readers who will think critically. More specifically the aim and purpose of the course book is not only, to make students literate but also, environmentally and socially aware of the problems that surround them.

#### ***2.4.5. Cultural Elements – Habits – Events***

Mention is made of the habits of different nations as well as the events which take place in each culture and which influence them and their way of life. This aids students in the understanding, the acceptance and respect of the “other” the “different”.

In the first unit students are informed that drivers in the United Kingdom drive on the left, whereas the rest of the world drives on the right. We are also informed that the Netherlands are not called Holland as this is just one of the regions in the Netherlands. Brazilians, on the other hand, consider themselves Americans and are offended when people call America only the United States. In South Korea people should not speak loudly or show their teeth as it is considered impolite, whereas in the

Arab countries excessive admiration of an object will oblige the person who owns it to give it away as a present. The listening part of the text (p. 9) presents the habits and way of life of the English through a radio programme in which people from all parts of the world express their opinion of the city of London. The Japanese are presented through pictures and a listening text which describes elements of the Japanese culture and way of life such as the "suchi" (food type), the "futon" (a type of cushion), the "sume" (an athletic game), the "furo" (a type of bath), a "kimono" (which women wear) and the overcrowded trains at rush hour (p. 10). What follows is a dialogue in which Ron learns the traditional Japanese dance of the dragon as he wants to take part in the Chinese New Year's Eve Festival, even though he is not Chinese himself.

The international cuisine and the nutritional habits of different nations are presented in unit three. Students are introduced both to exotic food such as the "Indian chicken corma" (p. 18), as well as, usual food such as sandwiches, salads, burgers and deserts (p. 19). Students also learn about the vegetarian diet, as well as, its variations (p. 20). An attempt is also made to combine countries with their traditional cuisine (p. 22). Students are asked to voice their opinion on their favourite food, as well as, the kind of international dish they would choose to eat and why.

Many accounts concerning the arts are presented in the course book. One of these accounts is Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451* which – as aforementioned – talks about life in the 24<sup>th</sup> century. In unit ten (10) students are introduced to music especially to old time classics such as "What a wonderful world", "Stand by me" and "My way" (p. 66). Students are also introduced to well-known writers, singers, producers, song writers and artists such as Louis Armstrong, Paul Anka, Ben E. King, Frank Sinatra, Woody Allen, Steven Spielberg, Vincent Van Gogh, J. K. Rowling, the Beatles and many others (p. 68-69). "The Sound of Music" is also introduced to young English language learners (p. 69). Students are interested in music, literature, the arts and the cinema and these interests often become a unifying force which bonds people of different racial, cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

### 3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The course books "Channel Your English – Elementary" and "Channel Your English – Pre-Intermediate", which the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs has recommended, meets the needs of intercultural education as they introduces students to different characters, nationalities, ethnic groups, cultures, habits and languages. The intercultural elements which are introduced are fine examples which, if used effectively, and according to the principles of interculturalism, by English language teachers, will trigger students' interest in the "other", the "different". A basic presupposition is that all English language teachers are trained to teach these intercultural elements to their students.

The pictures and the passages correspond directly to daily situations and everyday life of different people. Its thematic repertoire draws students' attention and

motivates them towards further investigation. Dialogues emphasize upon daily life and even though British English is mainly used, Englishes are also focused upon. Linguistic variations and information on other English speaking countries and their civilizations are also presented.

Bearing in mind that these course books are used in Greek schools and are taught mainly to Greek students, it would be more appropriate if elements of the Greek culture, both ancient and modern, were presented. More emphasis should also be given to nations and countries which are geographically closer to Greece such as Albania, Bulgaria, Turkey or countries of the former Soviet Union and countries of the Middle East, as Greek students regularly come into contact with people from these countries.

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