

Position Paper

Designing an international distance postgraduate programme for language educators as a critical reaction to the needs of refugees and migrants

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Abstract: In this paper we present and discuss the conception and design of the new postgraduate programme “Language Education for Refugees and Migrants” (LRM) as an initiative of the Hellenic Open University in order to critically react to the needs of refugees and migrants in current times of refugee flows to and through in Greece. We describe the course design and the development of an e-learning curriculum for language teachers of various levels who face several challenges in their everyday teaching practice working with learners of an immigrant or refugee background. We also present the rationale and the content of LRM which constitutes an innovation for the Greek but also the European context, and argue for its great importance for the local society but also for a broader target group of teachers who teach second language aiming at inclusion and social change. We further problematize the need for a changing culture in language education in general and suggest how open and distance learning can mediate and provide ‘accesses’ to disadvantaged, ‘silenced’ and marginalised language learners and language teachers transforming senses of place through flexible and inclusive learning spaces.

1 INTRODUCTION

The huge need of providing education for a whole generation of refugees occurred in Greece, Italy and Southern European countries in 2015 and, unfortunately but predictably, caught governments and educational authorities inadequately prepared. It should have been otherwise, but the struggle of European educational systems to integrate important numbers of refugees was not a really big surprise, after all.

In fact, after some decades of so-called inclusive policies, students with migrant background tend to underperform in schools all around Europe. Their educational outcomes are lower than the native students’, although evidence from research shows that their motivation is similar or higher. This trend does not tell anything about these students themselves, but it is a clear indication of low resilience and lack of adaptability for European

educational systems. Early ability tracking is one of the major factors of inequality: it creates segregation by class, ability and ethnicity in the school system, and reinforces the impact of family background on educational attainment. Combined with a lack of alternative vocational pathways, early tracking leads to increased drop out. Besides, research findings indicate that teachers who work with migrant students rarely work in good conditions and have low expectations, the teaching of migrants’ home languages is rather the exception than the rule, and communication between schools and families is often problematic.

In general, independently of intergovernmental bodies’ guidelines, national approaches change considerably with the change of governments and their agenda. The rise of nationalist and xenophobic political powers is an alarming sign from this standpoint.

2 SECOND LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN GREECE

The overall educational context in Greece is characterized by centralization and ethnocentrism. Research from the field of sociology of education clearly shows that competition and not solidarity is a central message in schools, a message shared by the majority of teachers and parents. Since 1990 and the beginning of post-communist era in Eastern and Central Europe, the Greek educational system faced the massive arrival of migrant students, mainly coming from Albania. In the late 90s, 10% of the student population in primary schools were of Albanian origin. Integration has not been smooth; initiatives funded by the EU have been discontinuous and inconsistent. Systematic evaluation of the so-called ‘intercultural educational projects’ has not been applied. As an indicator of low efficiency, the rate of migrant students’ access to Higher Education is extremely disappointing. Then, since 2015, the refugee influx breaks through. In January 2017, some 25,000-30,000 refugee children were reportedly residing in Greece, including around 4,000 unaccompanied minors. Just 10% among these children were enrolled in Greek public schools close to the refugee camps.

The risk of providing language education to refugees characterised by the same problems as the education of migrant children and adolescents during the past two decades is visible. It was mainly about linguistic assimilation of immigrant background students with a focus on the intensive teaching of Greek language regardless of their linguistic and cultural background (Damanakis 1997; Dimakos & Tasiopoulou 2003).

In 1996, ‘intercultural schools’ were established by law; one of the requirements was that 45% of the student population of these schools consists of ‘foreign’ students. Despite promising special curricula and provisions, this legislation led to the unsuccessful linguistic and cultural integration of non-Greek background students (Mitakidou et al. 2007). The intercultural educational policy aimed at ‘particular’ –ethnic minority– students and their learning needs, while it did not consider the sensitization of the total student population towards diversity (Damanakis 1997).

Measures taken by the Ministry of Education to address immigrant students’ educational needs concern exclusively reception and support classes in the Greek language, while there is no “space” for heritage languages teaching-learning, even though

these languages concern a large number of immigrant pupils like those of Albanian origin.

In this context, the training needs of language educators working in formal and non-formal teaching environments in Greece are changing and growing. Undergraduate teacher education in the Greek context fails to prepare language teachers appropriately in order to respond to the changing needs of this superdiverse group of learners within or/and outside the classroom. National curricula implement monolingual practices and orientations towards teaching language(s) and the teaching material doesn’t apply to the multicultural and multilingual changing ethnoscape (Appadurai, 1990).

3 “LANGUAGE EDUCATION FOR REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS” – LRM

3.1 The need for LRM as part of teachers’ postgraduate education

Based on our 7-year experience (2010-2017) from implementing educational and research programmes at the Greek Language and Multilingualism Laboratory in the University of Thessaly, addressing the linguistic and communicative needs of migrant target groups, we stress on the fact that training language educators is a rather challenging endeavour taking into account the usually conservative contexts within which those potential language teachers grow up, study, and finally act. Amplified migration during the last years has demonstrated the lack of trained and interculturally aware language teachers. This led us to design a new postgraduate programme in order to provide potential teacher-activists with critical tools to support action towards social change and transform language teaching into a multicultural and multilingual path to integration processes mutually empowering the actors involved. Some of the most important questions we had to answer during the conception and design of this new MA course and transform into decisions and curriculum, were the following:

- *Are there under-/post-graduate training programmes for language teachers offered in the Greek or the European context? If yes, what is their orientation? Are they designed to address refugees and migrant students?*

- *What modules should a postgraduate programme for language teachers include in order to address the changing needs of second language learners with a refugee or migrant background?*
- *What challenges does a language teacher face in his everyday practice within multicultural classrooms in formal and non-formal educational contexts?*
- *Is applied linguistics the sufficient basic knowledge for language teachers in order to substantially support his second language learners?*
- *What should the objectives and language choices of this MA take into account the diversified and fluid language needs of refugees who temporarily reside in Greece and plan to resettle in other countries?*

3.2 LRM: Description and objectives

It appears that there is a lack of a specialized postgraduate programme to support the training needs of language teachers in times of refugee flows, not only in the Greek but also the European context. Therefore, we decided to choose English as a working language of the course and invite international students to enroll. We perceive this initiative of the Hellenic Open University as a critical reaction to the growing needs of ‘silenced’, ‘invisible’ and disadvantaged populations that currently reside in Greece but have various future plans of resettlement elsewhere. Teachers who are already involved in different forms of refugee/immigrant education are in great need for guidance, support, teaching materials and flexible methodologies in order to meet their everyday needs. Our decision to integrate modules related to critical pedagogy, human rights and international law specifically for refugees and migrants, as well as an introduction to Arabic language and culture, was driven by this changing linguascape and the challenges reported to us by teachers we have cooperated in the context of various second language learning educational programmes. Offering this programme through a distance learning platform, we facilitated students who reside in different areas of Greece and other countries become part of this learning community eliminating the restrictions of mobility costs and spatiotemporal parameters. In order to address the above-mentioned questions and challenges, we have chosen Language Education, Course Design, Openness, Digitality, Criticality, Distance-learning, Multiculturality,

Target-Groups with a Refugee or Migrant Background as our keywords in the design of the entire programme, the modules and the learning outcomes.

As a consequence, the HOU’s Postgraduate Program entitled as “Language Education for refugees and migrants” is designed for teachers and graduates who wish to complete or deepen their knowledge and skills of teaching the language lesson in various languages, as well as develop new resources they can later apply to specific contexts and levels. The modules are designed to provide postgraduate students with a strong grounding in theoretical literature as well as appropriate classroom methodology, course design and an introduction to the key research tools.

As one of the six new, pilot courses designed in the context of HOU’s development strategy (Kalantzi et al. 2016), LRM incorporates: flexible semester modules, and participation of academic tutors throughout the educational process and the development of the learning material, new pedagogical and technical education solutions that improve the educational environment based on a student-centered approach (Sharples et al. 2015). It also integrates digital and interactive material abandoning the conventional way of providing material exclusively through printed books by creating digital learning activities, hence improving students’ interest and participation (Zheng & Warschauer 2015). Finally, it adopts and explores new ways of student support through the integration of synchronous communication between academic tutors and students, including mentoring, and new ways of communication and interaction.

The course aims to provide specialized pedagogical knowledge to teachers on both levels of compulsory education (Primary and Secondary) and to Tertiary graduates who plan to teach, as well as to teachers engaged in adult education in refugee or migrant contexts. It trains Greek and international students to pose and answer key questions in applied linguistics and second language acquisition in the world’s numerous, diverse multilingual contexts.

The course is designed to offer students the opportunity to reflect and further develop their understanding of both theoretical and practical considerations in the field of language learning and teaching drawing from the principles of critical pedagogy and translanguaging. It encourages students to develop a broad theoretical base reflecting current cutting edge research within applied linguistics and related disciplines. Additionally, this course makes links between the

different disciplines which contribute to our knowledge of language learning and issues related to language pedagogy focusing on action and activism as necessary preconditions for social change and justice. The programme is designed to be practical, provides opportunities to create bespoke teaching and learning materials, encourages deep engagement with the world of practice through visits to schools, refugee camps or other institutions related to formal and informal learning of refugees and migrants in different sites of Greece and other countries, team-teaching activities and project work.

The general objectives of the master's degree are to train specialized researchers in the main phenomena of language acquisition and applied linguistics in general, who can transfer research results to teaching practice and carry out basic applied research projects. The training will enable students to deepen their knowledge of applied linguistics, particularly with regard to second language acquisition, critical literacy and advances in new technologies for language research and learning. Students will develop greater knowledge and skills in relation to the new linguistic scenarios in schools and general society, and will carry out reflexive teaching practice.

The course's modules focus on the integration of language, culture, and codes of power as part of the development of formal, informal and non-formal, on-line and off-line educational programs and examine curriculum from a constructivist perspective that recognizes the voices of students, community and teachers as one learning community who inform curriculum and program design. The programme introduces participants to the concepts and basic principles of critical pedagogy; a theory of education that a) gives professionals the opportunity to reflect on their own educational beliefs, practices, and processes and b) gives teachers the voice and tools to reflect upon their teaching methodology vis-a-vis their student's critical thinking, promotes equality and social justice through action research within the school and community.

3.3 Course design and contents

Educational material

The programme's educational material is provided exclusively in a digital form. Specifically, various resources, from articles and book chapters to audiovisual elements, are used to cover the contents of each week's topics. Each week has a short description of what students are going to do during

the week, learning outcomes they are expected to achieve and some keywords. Video-lectures, interviews or podcasts as well as powerpoint presentations, reports, articles, book chapters and books are used as study materials. Each study week includes study material and relevant activities through which students are supposed to better understand the study material, reflect on their previous knowledge and experience, connect their realities to theory and scientific knowledge, develop and apply their skills in academic reading and writing, research, digital literacy, collaboration and intercultural communication. There are also optional activities or resources offered for further reading or practicing. The multimodal design of the educational material aims to respond to the various learning styles and needs of the students, and provide them with skills necessary for language teaching in the 21st century, an era characterized by digitization, multimodality and globalization processes.

The modules of LRM, divided in semesters, are designed as follows:

1st SEMESTER

LRM 50 Applied Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition (10 ECTS)

The module aims at deepening students' theoretical and practical knowledge about applied linguistics with regard to second language acquisition and providing them with the necessary skills and knowledge in order to teach language to refugees and migrants and conduct research on the field. Students will be trained to recognize the most important characteristics of the different approaches to second language acquisition, to compare and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to second language learning and teaching and will be introduced to modern theories in the wider field of language education. They will look into the international bibliography that provides a wealth of information for applied linguistics and second language acquisition in ways that all perspectives are given a place within the context of education

LRM 51 Migration, Multilingualism and Intercultural Communication (10 ECTS)

LRM 51 puts forward issues of language, culture and ethnicity and investigates migration and multilingualism as global realities that provoke innovative and creative ways of meaning making in education. We will look into the international bibliography that provides a wealth of information for language and culture contact in ways that all perspectives are given a place and a voice within the

context of education. Education, in formal or informal settings, holds the key to the development of a generation of citizens that will be in a position to respect difference in language, cultural and other values, viewing it as a natural part of their reality, educationally and socially.

LRM 52 Critical Pedagogy (10 ECTS)

In this module students are to be introduced to the basic principles of the theory of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is a theory of education that:

- a) Offers professionals the opportunity to reflect upon their own educational beliefs, practices, and processes in order to unpack their position as educators of the dominant culture,
- b) Gives teachers the voice and the tools to reflect upon their teaching methodology vis-a-vis their student's critical thinking,
- c) Equips teachers with tools so that they make the educational process empowering rather than overpowering for their students, and
- d) promotes equality and social justice through action research within the school and within the community.

Students are expected to critically examine the concept of language in relation to power and ideology and critically engage in the discussion about the ideological properties of language and its role as a major tool in processes for fighting for social and political power. Recognising the new linguistic scenarios in schools and in society students are expected to raise their critical consciousness which is a necessary precondition for carrying out reflexive teaching practice.

2nd SEMESTER

LRM 53 Language Teaching for Adult Refugees and Migrants (10 ECTS)

This course aims to introduce students to current issues of language learning within the context of language and culture contact. It includes discussions of the concepts of borrowing, transference, code-switching and the communicative functions of language contact phenomena. Within this course, we also discuss issues of the special needs of refugee and migrant adults, examine material that has been developed for the needs of migrant adults learning a second/foreign language. We will investigate innovative and alternative ways of assisting adult learners develop their linguistic skills, such as role play and digital scenarios. After studying the relevant bibliography and educational material, students will be provided with the opportunity to develop their own material for a population of refugee or migrant adult students, material that will

cater for the unique needs of the given population, in terms of language level, cultural values and everyday needs.

LRM 54 Language Teaching for Children with Refugee or Migrant Background R (10)

This course aims to introduce students to current issues of second language learning / teaching in a context characterized by extreme instability and cultural / linguistic discontinuity, stress. Our students are immigrant or/and refugee children with or without school experience in the country of origin. We need to understand the prior and community knowledge they bring with them, their linguistic repertoire, their educational experience. We explore ways how to bridge the gaps between old and new knowledge, first language(s) and the school language. Our main objective is to understand, meet their needs, provide a secure and empowering context that enables children to feel accepted and learn while tapping into all the linguistic knowledge they possess. Within the course we will discuss issues of bilingualism and second language learning, translanguaging, scaffolding, meaning making and literacy in linguistically diverse contexts. We will investigate innovative and alternative ways of assisting children develop their linguistic skills, their biliteracy and their self-esteem.

After studying the relevant bibliography and educational material, students will be provided with the opportunity to make educational proposals, to develop their own material for a population of refugee or migrant children, material that will cater for the unique needs of the given population, in terms of age, language level, cultural values and everyday needs.

LRM 55 Design and Development of Educational Material and Digital Media (10 ECTS)

Digital media and information technologies have changed the skills and competencies necessary for full participation in the 21st century life and workplace environments. The goal of this module is to familiarize students with new emerging literacies in school and out-of-school contexts as the rapidly evolving technology and media landscape is now producing a whole new range of new media beyond print. Specifically, students will be trained to recognize the most important models of educational design and they will become aware of digital supported educational innovations. They will be trained to understand and critique technology- and media-based learning and apply those skills to teaching in official, unofficial and non-official school settings. Furthermore, students will get

acquainted with learning and teaching technologies, they will search for digital educational content and they will design and develop learning objects and educational scenarios regarding second language learning and teaching.

3rd SEMESTER

LRM 60 Introduction to Arabic Language and Culture (10 ECTS)

The recent socio-political conditions that hold in Greece and Europe challenge educators to become acquainted with aspects of the Arabic language and culture, appreciate its complexities and be in a position to draw comparisons between elements of the Arabic and European languages and cultures. Students will be introduced to a world of great diversity and will be taught Arabic writing, issues concerning the various dialects of the Arabic language and will be coached to develop basic communicative skills in the Arabic variety of the Middle East.

LRM 61 Human Rights and International Law for Refugees and Migrants (10 ECTS)

Migration is one of the most crucial social issues in Europe and other regions of the world today. Migrants and refugees frequently face unjustified and even illegal behaviour concerning their human rights. The goal of this module is to provide students with a theoretical and practical background concerning human rights and international law for migrants and refugees. Students will discuss the notion of human rights, its scopes and content, and will be introduced to EU and ECHR Migration and Refugee Law. They will also discuss forced migration in an historical and human perspective and will be encouraged to reflect on the role of European institutions and international human rights bodies concerning forced migration and refugee hood.

LRM 62 Research Methodology in multilingual contexts (10 ECTS)

This course aims to introduce students to research methodologies that are applied in multilingual contexts and refer to school and society, to children as well as to adults. We will explore research methods for both quantitative and qualitative research. Emphasis will be put on qualitative research such as ethnographical observation, field research, action research with a critical perspective, life stories, and case studies concerning multilingual settings of migration and encampment. In this context we will study the research (methods and outcomes) carried out in the context of large scale projects in Greece and other countries that deal with refugee and migrant students in schools and in

informal and non-formal educational contexts as well as with local minority groups (i.e. Muslim minority in Thrace, Greece).

As for the target groups of our research these will be migrant students and adults, refugees, local minorities, but also students, adults and communities in the Diaspora.

After studying the relevant bibliography and research reports, students will be given the opportunity to make their own research proposals for a specific target group, name the main objectives, choose the appropriate methodological tool, design the research steps, make a time plan, search for literature. Research in students' own environments, families, communities, social world, etc will be encouraged.

4th SEMESTER

LRM 63 PR: Praktikum (20 ECTS)

During the fourth semester of their studies, the students are required to complete a praktikum internship with a duration of 250 hours in total. Within these hours, the preparation, realization, assessment and report completion of classes of one European language to a group of refugee or migrant children or adults are included. The classes can take place in a formal or an informal educational context in the country and city of residence of the students.

LRM 64 MA Thesis (10 ECTS)

4 CONCLUSION

In brief, apart from the social and financial issues, the efforts to implement responsible and inclusive educational initiatives for refugees in Greece have to face important deontological, ethical, methodological and practical problems. Needed is a lot of awareness, determination, composure, concertation and efficiency, but the mission is too important: it is about democracy, human rights, dignity and equality, and all the involved stakeholders, whether entities or agents, do not have the margin to fail.

As it is obvious by the choice and the content of its modules, LRM, the pilot study programme of the Hellenic Open University launched in autumn 2016, responds to the need for a changing culture in language education in general and advocates for the mediating role that open and distance learning can play, by providing 'accesses' to disadvantaged, refugee and migrant, language learners. The critical factor in order to improve the efficiency of language teaching is the awareness of language teachers, and

LRM has the ambition to do exactly this: raise awareness and help language teacher develop intercultural, multilingual, plural, social and professional skills that will empower them in their mission.

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