

## METALINGUISTIC AWARENESS AND WRITTEN PRODUCTION IN PRIMARY SCHOOL: A DIFFERENTIATED TEACHING APPROACH

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines whether a context-based differentiated teaching approach would improve guided writing, as well student metalinguistic awareness with respect to specific language phenomena in primary school children. The targeted phenomena were dialectal forms as a literary text convention and the distinction between past participles and adjectives in Greek, a morphologically rich language. A three-level model of differentiated teaching was used (see Fikaris, 2014; Tomlinson, 2005) with a class of 20 Greek-speaking primary school children 10 years of age. The model employs the intersections between learner profile and Curriculum objectives. The study is innovative since research in differentiated teaching with an emphasis on language is scarce for Greek educational environments (see for example Kokkinos & Gakis, 2020; Kokkinos et al., 2020) The acquaintance of children with dialectal forms is identified as one of the goals of language education in primary school, since students are expected to realize that standard language is only one form of linguistic expression, while metalinguistic awareness is considered as a key element in language development. This knowledge helps children improve written production skills. The results of a qualitative analysis of observation data as well as of quantified data from activities and written production showed that students improved across all targeted domains, both at the level of guided writing and at the level of metalinguistic awareness. Additionally, student participation and cooperation were supported enhancing positive attitudes towards the learning process.

**Keywords:** primary school, metalinguistic awareness, differentiated teaching, written production.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Metalinguistic awareness is defined in the literature as the conscious knowledge of the structure of the language and the function of linguistic units. Therefore, metalinguistic awareness involves awareness of the phonological, morphological and syntactic system of the language, of the semantics and the words of a language, as well as of the use of the language in real-life situations, i.e., of pragmatics. The raising of metalinguistic awareness is one of main goals of language education, especially in primary school, according to the directions of the Greek Ministry of Education and the National Curricula (National Curricula & Cross Thematic Curriculum Framework for Compulsory Education 2003, New National Curricula, 2011). It is described as a process by which the child realizes the innate knowledge that he/she has for his/her mother language, becomes aware of the linguistic repertoire of the mother language and the structural relations of its units and, ultimately, can employ language to communicate more effectively. Therefore, metalinguistic awareness is a prerequisite of communicative competence (Katsimali, 2007). Written production is a complex task where abilities and skills from all levels of representation are used. Specifically, for the successful composition of a text you have to be able to understand the communication context within which the text will be

placed in order to make successful language choices, you have to know the meaning of the words you will use, how these combine to form phrases and sentences, how sentences combine to form texts, how cohesion and coherence is achieved and of course you have to be able to read texts (see Hyland, 2015 for an overview of the different approaches to writing ).

This paper examines whether a differentiated teaching approach will boost metalinguistic awareness and written production in Greek-speaking primary school children. The focus is both on the methodology adopted, as well as on the cultivation of language awareness via specific activities.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Differentiated Teaching

Within the context of learner-centered approaches to teaching (see Brown, 2003; Weimer, 2002) where learner autonomy (Benson, 2007; Smith, 2008), cultivation of critical thinking (Bosley, 2008; de Villa, 2017) as well as analysis of learner needs (Androulakis, Mastorodimou & van Boeschoten, 2016; Brown, 2009) have been identified as critical issues, differentiated teaching (Anderson, 2007; Fikaris, 2014; Tomlinson, 2005, 2009, 2014) has emerged as a teaching methodology that can meet the aforementioned needs especially within a hyper-diverse linguistic, social, and educational context (Baynham & Moyer, 2012). A number of researchers have highlighted the beneficial effects of differentiated teaching in the cognitive, linguistic, social and emotional development of children (Anderson, 2007; Tomlinson, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2014; Fykaris, 2014; Magableh & Abdullah, 2020) Tomlinson, (2009) interestingly discusses the principles that differentiated teaching shares with literacy instruction, a basic means of teaching many aspects of language and language skills, written production being one of them. These are the following: a) students learn in a different way, b) teachers must study student profiles to teach effectively, c) teachers must set high goals for all students and not for the gifted ones and d) materials should be appropriate and correspond to student readiness, interests, and learning profile to enhance academic success. As regards implementation, the three-level model of differentiated teaching which this study used employs the intersections between learner profile and National Curricula rationale and objectives (Fikaris, 2014; Tomlinson, 2005). As is illustrated in Table 1, the horizontal axis refers to the Curriculum levels of objectives, while the vertical axis to aspects of student profile:

Table 1. Outline of teaching approach (Fykaris, 2014 based on Tomlinson, 2005)

Student	Curriculum		
	<u>1<sup>st</sup> level:</u> Defining and introducing the learning context	<u>2<sup>nd</sup> level:</u> Deepening process	<u>3<sup>rd</sup> level:</u> Achievement of learning objective
Functional Possibilities	Prior knowledge investigation	Prior knowledge emergence and relation to new knowledge	Evaluation of achieved knowledge & produced material / feedback
Learner readiness	Emergence of learner interests relevant to the object of teaching	Interest activation and adjustment	Evaluation of the effect of learner interest on the learning outcome
Learner talents and interests	Learning rate; how accessible is the learning content?	Student interaction and cooperation	Evaluation of the quality and effectiveness of communication

## 2.2 Morphological awareness and dialectal speech

Greek is a morphologically rich language. Morphological awareness, i.e., the awareness of the internal structure of the words both at the level of inflection and derivation (see for example Carlisle & Feldman, 1995), has been identified in the literature as key factor in the development of vocabulary, reading comprehension and writing skills as well as in spelling (Bar-On & Kuperman 2019; Carlisle, & Goodwin, 2014; Currie, Tong & Cain 2021; Manyak, Baumann & Manyak, 2018. For the Greek language see Pittas & Nunes, 2014. Grigorakis & Manolitsis 2016). Teaching interventions which target the raising of morphological awareness in Greek-speaking primary school children have shown the potential of such an approach with the results being promising. One such study is that of Tzanaki and Magoula (2020) who examined morphological awareness in Greek low frequency words in 84 students of 11 years of age. The results showed that high scores in the morphological awareness tests were correlated with high scores in oral and written comprehension and production tasks, as well as in overall academic achievement. Magoula and Katsouda (2011) examined morphologically manifested aspectual distinctions in Greek low frequency verbs and Tzakosta and Manola (2012) investigated nominal and verbal compounds in Greek. All these studies suggest that conscious attention to the structures of the words and direct teaching of the processes of identifying morphemes in words is beneficial for students, as is a text-centered approach where words are presented within a context. Focus on form approaches (see for example Long, 1991) seem to be gaining ground in areas where focus only on meaning cannot help the learner realize the grammatical rules and improve.

The use of dialectal speech is identified as one of the central goals of the National Curriculum and its use in literary texts is meant to make students realize the richness of dialects, the fact that the standard language is only one of the varieties of the Greek language, help them relate to the language that the students themselves might be using in every-day interaction, and cultivate critical literacy (Tzakosta, 2015). Recent work in the field of linguistics and teaching has focused on the ways Greek dialects can be employed in language teaching (see for example Dinas, 2015; Dinas & Zarkogianni, 2009; Tzakosta & Betinaki, 2018). Tzakosta and Betinaki (2018) investigated the attitudes of teachers towards dialects as well as their suggestions for the integration of the Cretan dialect in language teaching in primary school. Some of the basic techniques that the teachers identified as more promising involved the use of traditional songs and literary texts, the use of drama, the composition of short poems in the dialect and the use of databases of dialectal speech.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

The research method adopted is that of the case study, since a small-scale research is considered necessary before the method is investigated or piloted with larger samples of student populations. The participants of the study were 20 Greek-speaking primary school students 10 years of age recruited from a state primary school in Ioannina, Epirus, Greece. This area was chosen since it hosts the University Department where the researcher conducts her research. The two-hour teaching intervention took place in May 2021. The material used were a literary text (a story) from the school textbook involving dialectal forms (words and phrases), a detailed lesson plan employing the differentiated teaching approach of Table 1, a worksheet with language tasks and an observation sheet given to the teacher. The literature text was chosen by the teacher of the class, based on her student's interests and prior reading at the time of the investigation. The researcher explained the rationale, outline, procedure and goals of the intervention to the teacher of the class in two sessions that took place prior the teaching intervention. The researcher did not teach or observe the students herself due to pandemic restrictions. The goal of the research was to examine whether a context-based differentiated

teaching approach would improve guided writing, as well student metalinguistic awareness as regards specific language phenomena.

The stages of the teaching intervention were the following: At Level I (*Defining and introducing the learning context*), the teacher asked questions on what purposes the instances of dialectal forms serve for both the story and the characters that use it (duration: 5'). At Level II (*Deepening process*), the teacher aims at restructuring student ideas and directing their attention to the language phenomena under investigation. To this end, students are asked to underline three tokens of dialectal forms in the text and to discuss in groups why the character makes these languages choices and what the writer wishes to accomplish through that. Next, the teacher presents the students with an extract from the text in its original form and a similar one where all dialectal types were substituted with standard language types. Children compare the texts and return to the question set in the previous activity and discuss it again. Next, another extract is presented to the students, and they are asked to distinguish between the adjectives and the past participles used in the text. The students are given the relevant worksheet. This exercise is important, since past participles in Grek have adjectival use, however they are derived via verbs with the use of a specific morpheme, distinct from the morphemes that are used for the formation of adjectives, which the children are expected to identify. See the example below with an analysis of words from the text:

- (1) Υφασμάτινο  
 “Made from cloth”  
 Υφασμάτ -ιv – ο  
 root. – derivational. affix. – inflectional affix (person, number, gender)  
 “cloth” –derivational. affix (adjectives). – inflectional affix 3<sup>rd</sup> pers. sign. neut.
- (2) Παρατημένες  
 “abandoned”  
 Παρατ(η) – μεν-εs  
 Stem. – der. affix. – inflectional affix (person, number, gender)  
 “abandon” - der. affix (past participles). – inflectional affix. 3<sup>rd</sup> pers. pl. fem.

Since this exercise targets morphological awareness, the teacher is performing a morphological analysis of the words in the classroom a process that is not highlighted in the textbooks and directs the students' attention to the form of the words, as well as to the processes of identifying morphemes, namely substitutions in the syntagmatic (horizontal) and paradigmatic (vertical) axis (see Rally, 2005) (duration 40'). In the next phase of Level II, the students' ideas are activated. They are given a worksheet with prompts and key words (tokens of dialectal forms and past participles) and they are asked to produce short texts that continue the story and focus on the characters' letter exchanging about a basic event in the plot. In groups of two, half the class is writing as the dialectal speaking character, while the other half as the character using the standard language (duration: 25'). In phase 3, the students present their texts in class. The teacher asks question on the choice of particular words and their effect on the created story. In this way, all students become narrators and listeners, while pair work enhances student participation and involvement. At Level III (*Achievement of learning objective*), the work of the students and the teaching process itself is evaluated via formative assessment which targets the objectives of the intervention with an emphasis on student involvement, the product of the guided writing process and the relevant grammatical themselves.

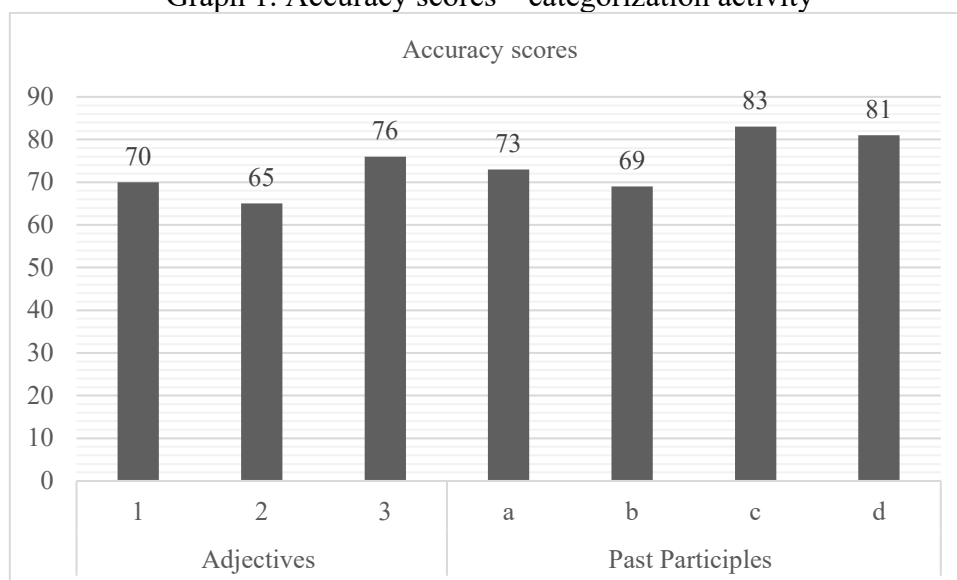
#### 4. RESULTS

As regards the results of the current teaching intervention, we will start with the teacher's observations as recorded in the relevant sheet. The information is organized in the following issues which correspond to the sections of the observation sheet: a) student participation according to individual learner profile, b) critical thinking and discovery learning, c) improvement of text understanding d) raising of metalinguistic awareness and e) active participation in the assessment process.

The teacher of the class reported the following: a) even though the intervention took place at the end of the school year when students were tired and less motivated, student participation was higher than usual, especially for the weaker students, b) discovery learning (Bruner. 1961), i.e., the realization of language characteristics rules by the processing of authentic texts and language data has boosted critical thinking. However, more time could be allocated in the language activities, c) the decoding of the text as regards organization, language conventions, writer choices and how these function for the story made students more involved both with the meaning and the form of the text, d) the focus on the morphological properties of the words helped students with the discrimination between adjectives and past participles in Greek, although both function as modifiers. As regards dialectal speech, children noticed the differences between the standard language and the dialect used with respect to vocabulary and phonology (the story was read by the teacher). Their interest laid the ground for a project on dialectal variety at a local level that will be designed and implemented the next school year, e) as regards assessment, working in pairs made weaker students less anxious about it, while participation in the process made them release their weaknesses and be more tolerant about the weaknesses and perceive of other students.

In Graph 1 we present accuracy scores from the categorization activity which involved a morphological analysis on the part of the student, since both words in Grek can function as modifiers, while only morphological properties (suffixes) can be used to distinguish between the two types. The text given to the children involved 4 past participles and three adjectives that the students had to detect and categorize correctly. Accuracy scores are presented by token per type.

Graph 1. Accuracy scores – categorization activity





As is shown in Graph 1, accuracy scores are high except for token 2 in both the adjective and the past participles type. In both cases, low frequency words are involved which are also more difficult at the level of morphological analysis. Next, we proceed with the presentation of the data from the students' guided production (see sample text in the Appendix). An analysis of the texts revealed that students correctly followed the conventions that were asked to follow (use dialectal forms or not) and they were able to produce complex sentences involving modification and subordination. Spelling errors were rather low, while the use of cohesion words is satisfactory. As regards the evaluation in terms of cohesion, we used Halliday & Hasan's (1976) model of successful use of cohesive ties, student texts were evaluated on these measures by both the researcher and the teacher. Table 2 presents data for each of the ten pairs.

Table 2. Guided writing text analysis

Text	Use of dialectal types (register)	Number of sentences**	Number of spelling errors	Coherence
1*	yes	20	3	Successful
2		23	2	Successful
3*	yes	19	0	Successful
4		18	0	Adequate
5*	yes	24	6	Successful
6		21	3	Adequate
7*	yes	26	4	Successful
8		22	3	Successful
9*	no	17	2	Successful
10		25	1	Adequate

\*Students were instructed to use dialectal speech tokens

\*\* estimated based on the number of verbs

## 5. DISCUSSION

The results presented in the previous section reveal that the differentiated approach adopted for this teaching intervention had a positive impact on the achievement of the goals set, namely, the raising of student metalinguistic awareness, improvement in guided written production and student involvement. Previous research underlines the positive effects of differentiated teaching across all types of teaching objectives, cognitive, social and emotional (Anderson, 2007; Fikaris, 2014; Magableh & Abdullah, 2020; Tomlinson, 2003; 2005; Zachou, 2021).

Metalinguistic awareness, one of the main goals of language education in primary school, according to the directions of the Greek Ministry of Education and the Curricula set for primary education (National Curricula & Cross Thematic Curriculum Framework for Compulsory Education 2003, New National Curricula, 2011), has been targeted in this research, first, with language activities examining the internal structure of Greek adjectives and past participles and, second, with activities that required students to identify the form and the function of dialectal forms within a literary text. These exercises were based on a given text of a specific register, employing specific conventions and linguistic choices. Concerning the first activity, the children were instructed on the identification of the formal characteristics of adjectives and past participles, and on the morphological composition of these words. Along with the text-based approach, attention was directed to the linguistic properties of these types of words, in line with previous research which suggested that conscious attention to the structures of the words and direct teaching of the processes of identifying morphemes in words is beneficial for students and necessary for the raising of metalinguistic awareness (Magoula & Katsouda, 2011. Tzakosta & Manola, Tzakosta et al. 2020, Tzanaki & Magoula, 2020). What is more, this

analysis of linguistic items is in line with one of the basic principles of linguistics as set by F. Saussure, namely that linguistic elements must be defined based on their formal features and not on their semantic ones (see also Hudson, 2008. Filippaki-Warbuton, 1992), since the latter cannot uniquely identify linguistic elements. As regards the acquaintance of the students with the use of dialectal speech in literary contexts, as well as with its function, the results are also positive, as students, first, were able to identify those types and successfully discuss their use, and second, were able to successfully incorporate them in their guided writing tasks. This shows that use of literary texts is an effective means for the incorporation of dialectal forms in teaching (see also Tzakosta & Betinaki, 2018). In the texts produced, the students mainly used types that appeared in the original text given to them, but they were also able, albeit to a lesser extent to use other types of dialectal types from the local dialects of the area.

Turning to the guided production results paired with data from the teacher's observation, these showed that pair work helped even weaker students participate in the activity and complete it, enhancing student involvement. Assessment, a traditionally anxiety-motivating teaching element for students (see Barrett & Turner, 2001. Putwain, 2007) was more easily accepted given that all students and student-pairs were both listeners and narrators of the produced texts. Additionally, a more detailed analysis of the texts revealed that students correctly followed the conventions that were asked to follow, were able to produce complex sentences and cohesion devices relatively free of errors. These results are in line with research which shows the positive impact of differentiated teaching in writing skills (see Chapman & King 2009) as well as with research showing the positive effect of focus on form teaching approaches (Long, 1991). The results also corroborate claims that some aspects of the area must be consciously focused on to raise metalinguistic awareness (Magoula & Katsouda, 2011; Tzanaki & Magoula, 2020). As Katsimali (2007) stresses it is only via the understanding of the nature of the grammatical properties of the language that one can become communicatively effective.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

This study adds to the growing body of research which reports positive effects of differentiated teaching and focus on form approaches to language teaching. Future investigation of the effects of such approaches on larger samples of students with diverse language and learner profiles can corroborate our results. This study is innovative since there is scarce research on the effects of differentiated teaching on language teaching and learning in Greek educational environments. We hope that this work will lay the ground for a large-scale research which will highlight crucial factors and interrelations underlying the procedure.

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## APPENDIX

Sample of student production

