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According to Richards (2012:2), language curriculum development is 'an interrelated set of processes that focuses on designing, revising, implementing and evaluating language programs'. In its broadest sense, curriculum includes the philosophy, purposes, design and implementation of a whole program (Spinthourakis, 2004). Foreign language (FL) curricula represent the philosophy, trends, demands and conditions of their era and society. The purpose of this article is to attempt a critical analysis and evaluation of the Unified Curriculum for the Foreign Languages (EPS-XG)¹ on the basis of its educational orientation, language theory and areas of knowledge as outlined in the formal document by relying upon theoretical principles and background information from the relevant educational literature.

Maria D. Tzotzou

A critical analysis and evaluation of the Unified Curriculum for the Foreign Languages (EPS-XG Curriculum)



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Introduction

Curriculum development in language teaching began in the 1960s; it focuses on determining what knowledge, skills, values and experiences should be provided to learners to achieve the intended learning outcomes, and includes all the processes involved in developing, implementing and evaluating language programs.

There have been various definitions of curriculum drawn from the relevant educational literature. According to Eisner and Valance (1974:2, cited in Spinthourakis 2004), curriculum is concerned with 'what can and should be taught to whom, when, and how'. Tyler (1949, cited in Spinthourakis 2004) describes curriculum as a four-step process including stating objectives, selection and organization of experiences and evaluation while Ross

Key words:

curriculum, educational orientation, language theory, multiliteracies, plurilingualism/multilingualism, pluriculturalism/multiculturalism, behavioural objectives

¹ <http://rcel.enl.uoa.gr/xenesglosses/sps.htm>

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(2000:8) points out that 'a curriculum is a definition of what is to be learned'.

A curriculum in a school context refers to the whole body of knowledge that children acquire in schools (Richards, 2012). In particular, a school curriculum aims to equip learners with values, ideals and knowledge that will help them meet the future in accordance with the philosophy and culture of their society. Its content, organization and objectives are significantly influenced and shaped by external basic forces mostly related to society and culture, the learning theory, philosophy and the nature of knowledge (Zais, 1976 cited in Spinthourakis 2004).

In the present article, there is an attempt to make a critical analysis and evaluation of the latest foreign language curriculum, the so-called EPS-XG curriculum, which is unified for all foreign languages and levels. The EPS-XG curriculum is geared toward learners attending public/state schools, has been

processed by experts and scientists of education and is formal as it has been approved by the body responsible for the Greek educational system for use in schools (Goodlad, 1979 cited in Spinthourakis, 2004).

Theoretical background

Regarding the ideological bases of curricula, White (1988) makes reference to different models of curriculum design representing the expression of different value systems, divergent views and orientations on education. Similarly, according to Clarke (1987) there is a set of beliefs and views on the nature of knowledge and the purpose of education underlying any curriculum such as those focusing on cultural heritage, those that regard education as an instrument of change and those stressing growth and self-realization of the individual termed as Classical Humanism, Reconstructionism

and Progressivism respectively.

More specifically, the classical humanist approach to curriculum design is characterized by a desire to promote broad intellectual capacities such as memorization and the ability to analyse, classify and reconstruct elements of knowledge. Knowledge is seen as a set of revealed truths, whose underlying rules and regularities should be studied and consciously mastered. There is emphasis on study, conscious understanding and controlled application of knowledge. The teacher is seen as a transmitter of knowledge and the learner's task is to acquire knowledge so as to be able to control and apply it in new contexts. The classical humanist curriculum is content driven and the designer sets out to analyse what is seen as the inherent content of a subject into its constituent parts and then sequences these from what are deemed to be the simpler elements to learn to what are considered to be the more complex ones (Clarke, 1987: 5-8).

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Reconstructionism emphasizes the practical aspects of education and the promotion of international and intranational understanding. It does not focus on the structure of the subjects to be studied but on the development of objectives to be achieved. A main tenet of reconstructionism is that man can improve himself and his environment and that changes on a social, economic and intellectual level can be rationally planned for. Education is seen as a powerful agent of change. It is seen as a means of redressing the injustices of birth and early upbringing and of working through consensus towards a better world in which all citizens are equally valued. Great focus is placed on planning, setting goals to be pursued and of deliberate interventions in the education system to bring about outcomes deemed necessary. In sum, reconstructionism emphasizes the importance of planning, efficiency

and rationality (Clarke, 1987: 14-15).

Progressivism promotes a learner-centered approach to education which attempts to promote the learner's development as an individual with intellectual and emotional needs and as a social being. The learner is seen as a whole person rather than a disembodied intellect or a skilled performer. For progressivists, education is not seen as a process for the transmission of a set of closed truths but as a way of enabling learners to learn how to learn by their own efforts. Teachers are not instructors but creators of an environment in which learners learn how to learn. Progressivists are more concerned with learning processes and methodology than with predetermining learning objectives (Clarke, 1987: 49-51).

In what follows, we will first 'explore' and reflect on the educational orientation, language theory and areas of knowledge included in the EPS-XG curriculum in order to be able to discuss any pros and cons and, thus, draw useful conclusions and implications about its classroom implementation.

Critical Analysis of the EPS-XG curriculum Educational Orientation

The Unified Curriculum for Foreign Languages (EPS-XG)² combines two educational orientations: Reconstructionism and Progressivism as defined by Clarke (1987) and described above. Regarding Reconstructionism, it embraces the principle of international/world understanding by promoting plurilingualism and pluriculturalism in an attempt to enhance intercultural awareness, respect and tolerance (Chryshochoos J., Chryshochoos N. & Thompson, 2002). FL education is seen as a



powerful agent of change towards social welfare and solidarity based on multilingualism and respect to language/cultural diversity. It places emphasis on the importance of planning, efficiency and rationality by making reference to materials, teaching staff, timetable, self-assessment and school equipment matters. It also follows a systematic planning based on the FL levels/criteria defined by the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2001) and the relevant Greek and European research data.

The EPS-XG curriculum attempts a deliberate intervention in FL education system by planning a unified curriculum for FL towards a more efficient FL education in school. It is also innovative as it is the first unified FL curriculum in school education based on FL proficiency levels by providing descriptions that apply to competence in all languages across all levels. Another principle of reconstructionism is that it emphasizes goal setting, the desired outcomes of the curriculum, related to multilingualism, multiculturalism and effective FL communication in any sociocultural context. It also aims at social and intellectual change through FL education promoting practical aspects of

FL education, its pedagogical, social and international benefits. Moreover, it emphasises the close connection of FL goals with outcomes providing a detailed list of general and specific objectives for each language proficiency level.

Regarding Progressivism, it adopts a learner-centered approach treating the learner as a whole by aiming to offer linguistic, intellectual and social development. It takes into consideration the learner's development both as an individual and as a social being. It promotes learner's active role, autonomy and metacognitive ability (Littlewood, 2004) by emphasising the learning process and creating a context in which the teacher and the learner work together (Cotterall, 2000); at the same time the teacher becomes the creator and decision maker.

Language Theory

The EPS-XG curriculum promotes functionalism which relies on language as a system of communication facilitated by a systematic exposure to the target language (Chryshochoos et al, 2002). In this respect, it emphasises an interactive view of

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² For more details, download and study the EPS-XG curriculum from the following website: <http://rcel.enl.uoa.gr/xenesglosses/sps.htm>

language that is, its meaningful use in interaction (Skehan, 2003), contextual learning (Stoller, 2004), communicative competence (Hymes, 1971 cited in Crombie, 1988) and fluency (Chryshochoos et al., 2002). It favours free language production through simulations, communicative and mediation activities focusing on meaning, information processing, actual language use with a goal of communication (Cotterall, 2000) and on the negotiation of meaning (Long, 1983 cited in Skehan, 2003) which concerns the way learners encounter and grapple with several communication difficulties. Finally, it looks at language as a functional instrument and a form of social behaviour (Chryshochoos et al, 2002).

Areas of knowledge

The EPS-XG curriculum aims to promote multiliteracies toward a holistic development of learners by enhancing their linguistic, pragmatic, sociocultural and sociolinguistic knowledge (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). It includes new areas of knowledge, besides the comprehension and production of oral discourse and written speech. It aims to develop oral and written mediation skills, oral and written interaction skills, learning and communication strategies, which can help raise learner's intercultural and multicultural awareness and competence. It also intends to promote learners' conscious ability and sense of plurilingualism/multilingualism and pluriculturalism/multiculturalism (Chryshochoos et al, 2002).

Critical Evaluation of the EPS-XG curriculum

EPS-XG merits

To start with, the EPS-XG curriculum is goal-oriented, extensive and specific in content emphasizing the goals and special objectives of the FL school program. It defines goals which represent more general, societal and community concerns related to the patterns of language use in society as well as attitudes toward language; it states objectives



(as descriptive indices) which are specific outcomes, achievable and measurable, that guide teachers and help learners know what they are going to learn (Dubin & Olshtain, 1986). In particular, the EPS-XG curriculum defines specific behavioural objectives describing intended learning outcomes that contain a condition of performance, a verb that defines the behaviour (skill or ability) itself, and the degree to which a learner must perform the behaviour (Spinthourakis, 2004). To this end, action verbs (e.g. suggest, explain, negotiate, recognize, produce, gather/transmit/exchange information, discuss, describe, classify, answer, ask, narrate, etc) are used to identify what the learners are expected to do in order to communicate effectively in the foreign language.

The EPS-XG curriculum is a communicative curriculum designed to engage Greek learners in realistic communication contexts (Crabbe, 2007) and it is also holistic and pluralistic (multilingual-multicultural). It is open (teacher's autonomy), innovative (unified), handy (by linking directly FL learning at school with FL certification exam system-KPG), flexible (adaptable whenever necessary) and

systematically planned based on empirical research data from various contexts. It recognizes and encourages the role of teachers as creators and decision-makers (Graves, 1996) and not as simple implementers. It also encourages the use of technology toward a multimodal approach to FL learning (Jewitt, 2006) through technological tools which can increase motivation and the achievement of learning objectives and strategies (Cotterall, 2000; Crabbe, 2007; Stoller, 2004).

The EPS-XG curriculum holds a learner/learning-centered view (emphasis on what to be learnt) of FL education. It aims at differentiated FL learning by taking into account different learners' origin, needs, preferences, background and style and, hence, linking outside-classroom reality to inside-classroom language pedagogy (Littlewood, 2004). In addition, the EPS-XG curriculum lays emphasis on the needs of the society which are to be met. In other words, the EPS-XG curriculum verifies what Cornbleth (2008) points out about echo effects on curriculum policy and their dependence on the social echoes which result in curriculum changes regarding learning

goals, pedagogical values and priorities.

EPS-XG demerits

Although scientifically planned and developed on the basis of various empirical data, the EPS-XG curriculum seems to be extremely demanding and complicated mainly due to a number of limitations. More specifically, some kind of situation analysis (Richards, 2012) can reveal several key factors in the school context (e.g. societal, school, teacher, learner, adoption factors) which may negatively affect its implementation as already mentioned in the EPS-XG curriculum document. Additionally, although the role of needs analysis is essential to curriculum planning (Graves, 2008; Richards, 2012), the EPS-XG curriculum seems to lack any needs analysis process to diagnose Greek learners' actual language needs before selecting its content and formulating goals/objectives accordingly.

Therefore, it would be better if the EPS-XG curriculum became more operational (Goodlad, 1979 cited in Spinthourakis, 2004) by assigning to researchers to investigate in advance what actually goes on in the FL classroom at the Greek state schools in order to take action in due time. In other words, the school classroom should be considered a sociocultural context with its own social systems, norms, values and dynamics and hence, should be 'scanned' as it can essentially shape what is possible in a language curriculum. On similar grounds, taking into account what Nation and Macalister (2010) support about the evaluation of curriculum design, evaluation policies and self-evaluation matters should have been further emphasized and specified in advance and practiced on a regular basis in order to achieve the desired educational outcomes. As Graves (2008) points out, a curriculum cannot exist without teaching and learning experiences because planning and evaluating are both linked to classroom practices and are closely allied with them.

In a similar vein, a collaborative approach to

curriculum development (Nunan, 1989) based on the quality of relationships between participants and the sharing of responsibility between the different stakeholders in the educational system (e.g. teachers, researchers, curriculum specialists and administrators) could ensure to a greater extent its successful implementation. In particular, the knowledge, experience and beliefs of FL teachers should be a necessary tool and reliable guide to reality and should be constantly exploited in the best possible way by curriculum planners because the teacher is the person with the most powerful role in the classroom and his/her involvement is critical to the success of the curriculum (Graves, 2008). Main concerns, thus, have to do with the relevant teacher training which normally should have been a prerequisite for its successful implementation. To this end, a needs analysis procedure should have been preceded in two directions to investigate and record not only learners' actual language needs but also teachers' profile regarding their own training needs, their teaching experience, pedagogical views and attitudes.

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Conclusion

On the basis of the above mentioned, the EPS-XG curriculum is undoubtedly characterized by plenty of 'visible' advantages regarding its goals, philosophy, nature and content. However, they cannot eliminate its 'invisible' drawbacks basically due to some planning weaknesses and state school limitations. In any case, it is hoped that after a systematic evaluation of its pilot implementation there will be curriculum improvements as appropriate. For example, there should be a revision of school textbooks toward a unified version of the FL material that will correspond to the EPS-XG curriculum goals and demands.

Last but not least, the EPS-XG curriculum is innovative and represents the 'culture' of our globalized society and era made up of specific ideas, ideals, beliefs, values, assumptions, conditions and, thus, new trends and modes of FL learning.

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