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Connecting Greek and Canadian Schools through an Internet-based Sister Class Network

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Introduction

Educational programs for on-line learning in the World Wide Web (WWW) are constantly increasing in number. Pairing school classes or connecting them into networks is becoming very common. Surfing through educational networks, a first conclusion to be drawn is that they address a wide range of educational issues from very general issues referring to the possibilities and consequences of on-line learning and the Internet to very specific ones referring to certain tools, tasks and materials used. Some issues that are often referred to are collaborative learning, (e.g. Dillenbourg 1999) literacy/electronic literacies (e.g. Warschauer 1999, Murray 2000) and intercultural understanding (e.g. Mueller-Hartmann 2000). The WWW seems to offer a strong promise as a learning environment that facilitates collaborative projects and enables students to develop new forms of literacy and understand cultural differences.

I will refer here to a sister-class project that paired school classes in Greece (on the island of Rhodes and on the island of Kasos) with school classes in Canada (Toronto) with students of Greek origin. The project was designed as an electronic environment for teaching and learning English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) for Greek elementary school students in Greece as well as for teaching and learning Greek as a second language (GSL) for students of Greek origin in Canada. It functioned via two websites, one, called DiaLogos (<http://www.rhodes.aegean.gr/gr/progra/dialogos>), organized by the Greek side and the other one, called Metro-polis (<http://www.metro-polis.com>) organized by the

Canadian side. The idea for this project evolved out of many discussions with Jim Cummins, OISE /Toronto /Canada during a series of workshops on Bilingualism and on-line learning organized by the Research Group on Bilingualism and Bilingual Education at the Department of Primary Education /University of the Aegean, Rhodes /Greece. The final project was implemented for two academic years: i.e., 1998-1999, 1999-2000¹ in Greek and Canadian schools with students of Greek origin and it was supported by European Union funding through the Greek Ministry of Education. Two PhD theses each dealing with one side of the connected school classes are in progress at the University of the Aegean / Greece and at the University of Toronto / OISE / Canada. In 2000 a Canadian government fellowship (Canadian Studies Award) gave me the opportunity to deepen my knowledge of the work of a few Canadian academics, most of whom are or were teaching at OISE. Cummins' work on bilingualism and the development of academic language and critical literacy (Cummins 1996, 2000; Cummins & Sayers 1995), Wells' work on literacy, on Vygotsky's 'Zone of Proximal Development' and on critical inquiry as a condition for learning (Wells 1999) and Corson's (1995) work on vocabulary are some of the concepts I rely upon when dealing with the sister-class project.

Initial Thoughts and Actions

There were a series of things we wanted to realize through this project. First of all we tried to create a 'space' in the curriculum that would represent a real domain for getting comprehensible input and for using the target language as a tool to create knowledge and to critically reflect on it. In matters of students / teacher relationship, we tried to create the conditions for collaborative learning and for 'apprenticeship' in Wells' (1999) sense. This space would be provided in the form of an electronic environment where the students on the one side had as target language the first language of the students on the other side (Greek/English). Class to class and student to student communication, contextual support in accessing and creating meaning in the target language, mutual help to the other sister class in accomplishing educational tasks, common projects carried out by both sides, and a place to publish the students' work, were the selected activities. The time difference (7 hours) between Greece and Canada resulted in an entirely asynchronous communication. This 'restriction' gave

¹ In the academic year 1997-1998 a pilot project was undertaken at the three experimental schools of

us the opportunity to concentrate on the language of written texts (Wells 1999) as well as on the combination of written forms and more conversational ones in the context of the students' e-mails (Kalantzis & Cope 2000). Furthermore, it gave the students the opportunity to repeatedly come back to their original texts in order to edit them and to reflect upon them.

A short description of the project will give insight into:

1. The initial situation,
2. the theoretical principles and hypotheses the project was founded upon,
3. the objectives of the project,
4. examples of the designed activities and of the contextual support,
5. problems during the implementation,
6. conclusions to be drawn up to now.

I will not go into depth in all of the points above. Kourtis Kazoullis (forthcoming) offers a complete description of all stages of the project, analyzing the educational tasks that were carried out. I will focus here on some of the points that seem to me of interest for further research. My experience of the program reflects mostly the Greek side; therefore the examples I will use here are taken from DiaLogos².

1. The initial situation

To start with the given situation, a major feature is the island geography of Greece. Two uneven factors are very powerful in the Greek context: (1) temporary isolation of an island in the winter months due to stormy weather and (2) a rigid National Curriculum that covers all subject areas. In terms of teachers, school organization, material, technical equipment, number of students, language diversity of students and number of classes, schools on the Greek islands differ a lot. Isolation and its consequences is the first and very brutal divide the schools have to face. On the island of Kasos, a remote island in Southern Aegean, the program was implemented in a small village with three classes accommodating six grades (instead of six classes accommodating six grades), run by three teachers instead of six. No English teacher was available in the school. A high school teacher from a bigger village volunteered to teach English in her free time.

the University of the Aegean in the city of Rhodes.

² The coordinator of the project on the Greek side Vassilia Kourtis Kazoullis has collected and evaluated the data concerning DiaLogos.

In the winter months one might experience a peculiar situation with transport services temporally cut off but Internet still functioning. As regards the National Curriculum, there are very specific materials and instructions on what should be covered in each subject during the academic year and which skills to stress. Nevertheless, the Greek Ministry of Education used a European Union funding to support experimental projects covering certain areas of the curriculum. A third of the time planned for teaching a subject in the weekly timetable would be devoted to the experimental projects. The approved projects would have a two-year implementation time and independent judges would evaluate the outcome. Our sister-class project was given a 'space' of one teaching hour weekly out of a total of three teaching hours for EFL in grades 4, 5, 6. During the first year (1998-1999) the project was implemented in all three grades in the participating schools, while in the following year (1999-2000) the project was implemented only in the 6th grade of the participating schools. We picked five Greek schools for the implementation, while the Canadian side picked equivalent sister classes: Three schools in the city of Rhodes that are affiliated to the University of the Aegean, Department of Primary Education, a school in a large village (Kremasti) not far away from the city on the island of Rhodes and a small school (six grades organized in three classes) in the village Agia Marina on the island of Kasos in the Southern Aegean. The only thing that the above schools have in common is the National Curriculum. Apart from this we faced not only diversity due to geographic location but also the diversity of the school population that proved to be very crucial in terms of how EFL teaching was implemented.

English represents a first or a second language for several groups of students: for example for students from culturally mixed families (father Greek, mother English speaking, or families where English is used as a medium of communication between parents with different first languages other than Greek or English), for students from families where both parents are English speaking, for students from Greek families who returned to Greece after having spent time in an English speaking country. So, in any of the grades of the elementary school (4-5-6) where EFL is taught, native speakers of English, advanced learners of EFL, bilingual students (Greek and language/s other than English) are side by side with Greek monolingual students who might have little or no experience of English. In other words, monolingual Greek students with some or no knowledge of EFL are grouped together with users of English, some of whom may have developed conversational skills or even academic

language proficiency in English. Coming back to the National Curriculum the diversity we have just referred to is not taken into account so that proficiency levels are not made according to actual competence but entirely according to grade: All students in grade 4 are considered to be beginners, all students in grade 5 are considered to be at an intermediate level, all students in grade 6 are considered to be advanced learners. In the context of the curriculum, EFL is an isolated subject with no relevance whatsoever for any other subject. Thus English remains a foreign language that offers strong promise for future use but is not actually used for other purposes in the school. In addition, EFL is taught in a traditional environment that is clearly defined in the National curriculum. Furthermore sharply defined teacher/student roles prescribe both the expected outcome and its evaluation.

To have an actual picture of the schools involved in the project we used the data-collection system ‘Systematized bilingualism’^{3,4} to map the languages other than Greek spoken by the students, the way the students acquired or learned them and the domains in which they actually used them. In the schools in the city we identified numerous bilingual students from culturally mixed families whose home language was English or some other first –and usually European- language. In the school in the village of Kremasti most bilingual students were either Roma or immigrant children from Albania. Most Rom students attended the school for only part of the year, following their parents to several market places in the country during the rest of the time. In the school in the island of Kasos there were no bilingual students in the classes involved in the project.

Several issues also arose concerning the teachers: for example, the frequent turnover of teachers in the Greek school system, so that only in the school of Kremasti (Rhodes) did we have the same teacher for the two years of the project. In all other schools we experienced either the lack of a teacher (Kasos) or the turnover of three different teachers in a single school class (Rhodes). The lack of knowledge of computers was another issue.

2. The theoretical principles and hypotheses the project was founded upon

³ In academic year 1998-1999 16.9% of all students in the grades 4, 5, 6 in all participating schools were bilingual, while in the year 1999-2000 14.1% of all students in grade 6 in all participating schools were bilingual.

⁴ ‘Systematized Bilingualism’ refers to a series of Questionnaires developed at the University of the Aegean (E. Skourtou) and the University of Athens (V. Gialamas), (see Gialamas et al 2000)

My understanding of bilingualism and second language education has been strongly influenced by Cummins' work. In the way he integrates bilingualism with critical literacy and transformative pedagogy, I can see huge practical implications for culturally and linguistically diverse school contexts. In a very clear way Cummins addresses issues of educational policy as a product of power relations in the broader social context (see also Corson 1999). His theoretical frameworks are orientated to challenging these power relations in the 'heart of schooling', i.e. in the human relation of the teacher to his/her students. From this perspective, the sister class project has less to do with the technology itself and more with what takes place through and 'around' it. Cummins' 'pedagogical framework for second language learning in the context of computer-supported sister class networks' (Cummins 2000, 2000a) underlies the central position of teacher/student interactions in two ways: As regards the students, the framework aims to maximize both 'cognitive engagement' and 'identity investment'. As regards the target language, the framework aims to focus initially on meaning, then on the forms of language and finally on using the language creatively. In focusing on meaning, Cummins takes the notion of 'comprehensible input' (Krashen 1985) beyond literal comprehension. He argues that this is possible when the students are encouraged to activate their prior knowledge, i.e. to relate the meaning of the text to their actual experience, share this with peers and teacher within 'a collaborative process of critical inquiry' and proceed from the initial 'experiential phase, to literal, to personal, to critical and eventually to the creative phase'. In this process what has been learned, becomes 'action' and takes the shape of a text. We use here the same notion of 'text' as Halliday (1990): anything written or spoken that entails meaning. Extending this, we include in it anything 'meaningful' the students produce. Cummins speaks of 'identity investment' and of 'identity texts'. An identity text according to Cummins is a text in any form (e.g. written, spoken, visual, musical) the students could identify themselves with.⁵

In focusing on language, Cummins suggests that teaching the formal features of the target language should be part of an extensive investigation into language and into its actual use in different contexts, including cross-lingual comparison. Finally, in focusing on use of the language, Cummins emphasizes that generating new

⁵ Cummins, personal communication, March 2001.

knowledge includes the production of texts or artistic displays for an ‘authentic audience’ that encourages ‘two-way communication’ and reflection on social realities. Cummins’ framework seems to be highly compatible with Wells’ concept of creating ‘a collaborative community of practice’ in the classroom (Wells 1999). In a recent work, Wells (1999) refers neither to the Information Technology (IT) environment nor to second language learning itself. His approach focuses on learning *through* language, on the relationship between discourse and the process of ‘knowing’. He uses the ‘apprenticeship’ metaphor to imply that ‘learning must take place, not as an independent, decontextualized event, but as an integral part of carrying out (those) activities’ (Wells 1999:143). He suggests organizing the curriculum in a way that makes it possible for students, individually or in groups, to choose and plan their ‘topics of inquiry’ in negotiation with their teachers; he shows ways in which students should be encouraged to activate their cognitive schemata by bringing into the classroom their everyday knowledge from the community and he highlights the importance of using complementarily both modes of discourse (talking and writing) in producing texts and reflecting upon them. His reference to ‘written educational knowledge’ as a typical feature of the schoolbooks takes us to the distinction between conversational and academic aspects of language (Cummins 1996, 2000) as well as to the gap between academic and everyday vocabulary in the context of the same language (Corson 1995).

Wells’ (1999) notion of ‘critical inquiry’ incorporates in powerful way cultural aspects of learning. Wells’ approach is deeply rooted in the constructivist tradition of creating new knowledge in the context of Vygotsky’s ‘zone of proximal development’. Cummins takes the task a step further: he emphasizes relating the generated knowledge to existing social circumstances in order to highlight how social distribution of power determines patterns of learning in school.

If we attempt to ‘capture’ the above concepts into a single theoretical schema that corresponds to the IT environment we designed for DiaLogos, I would say that Cummins’ framework for academic language learning (Cummins 1996, 2000) is a suitable one. For those familiar with Cummins’ concepts, this framework has a central place: It combines cognitively demanding educational activities, the language used in the activities, and the supports (scaffolding) offered to the students as a means of helping students overcome language barriers, access the meaning and solve the task.

In a similar way, Wells' concept of the 'community of dialogic inquiry' offers the opportunity to contextualize learning again. In terms of pedagogical orientation, both frameworks are highly compatible in conceptualizing all the educational issues we dealt with in the project. Both frameworks are based on constructivist and transformative pedagogy.

3. The objectives of the project

The first objective of the project was to design the learning environment in a way that could take account of the diverse relations of the individual students to the target language, i.e. an environment where students with developed English conversational and/or academic language skills would be effectively taught in the same class as students with limited English language skills. Similarly, the environment had to meet the needs of students and teachers with developed or limited computing skills (see example below). According to the theoretical principles on which the project was based sufficient support should be offered for students to participate effectively. It was a major objective of the project to motivate the students to decide which source they would turn to for help (e.g. teacher, peers in the classroom, peers in the sister class, skillful adults in their communities, WWW), what kind of support (e.g. a traditional lexicon or an electronic one) and in which language (first language or target language). In matters of organization the school class was organized in mixed ability groups (Chatzidaki 2000) with the objective of having students with a developed skill (e.g. computing or language skills) help others whose skills were more limited. The project did not intend to radically replace the existing patterns of learning. Given the limited time available in the context of the whole curriculum, we tried to combine practices that were known to the learners with new ones that emerged entirely because of the IT environment. Thus the specific projects that were carried out in each class were not entirely designed and worked out in the context of the sister class connection in the WWW. Many parts (e.g. preparation or concluding part) were carried out in the class before and/or after actual Internet connection between sister classes. Putting the activities in order of significance, we tried to move

from communication to collaboration in carrying out separate projects to working collaboratively together on a common project⁶.

4. Examples of the selected activities and of the contextual support

Kourtis Kazoullis (forthcoming) presents and analyses the huge range of e-mail exchanges, the individual projects of the classes on the Greek side as well as the common project between the sister-classes on both sides. Furthermore she presents the outcomes of interviews with all teachers and with a random sample of students. She points to those features that document the basic principles of the project in terms of the effects on language, on the content of learning and on the students' identities. In each individual task there was the stage of preparation where the main objective was the activation of the prior and everyday knowledge of the students of content and the vocabulary. After the text created by the students was posted on the web board or emailed to the sister class there was always the possibility of coming back to it for editing purposes. The students were encouraged to use the target language, but they were also allowed to use their mother tongue if they felt they needed to. Often one activity led to others giving rise to more texts than originally planned. The main features of this process could be characterized as creative thinking and writing. The kind of project work that was carried out by the students would have had no place in the traditional curriculum. Furthermore the students used and produced language structures of academic English that were far beyond the goals of such a curriculum.

An interesting example concerns a project on a local holiday to celebrate the annexation of Rhodes and the Dodecanese island group in the late 1940s: In order to describe the event to their peers in the sister class, the students discussed the event with their teacher, what they knew about it from home, and how it is presented in their schoolbooks. They also worked out the information they wanted to transmit and checked the vocabulary they were going to use. A word referred to where different people stand in relation to the Greek national flag on ceremonial occasions. The students could not find the equivalent English word(s). They asked all the persons involved in the project, starting with their teacher, the coordinator of the project, the university students who assisted in the classroom, their peers in the class and their

⁶ See Dimitracopoulou (2000) for the educational significance of communication and collaboration through WWW.

peers in the sister class. There was no consensus as to the English equivalents of this single Greek word. The students turned to a conventional dictionary, but this was no help either. They also looked up in the electronic dictionary with the same results. The students became aware that the words given as equivalent in dictionaries were used in a different context so they were irrelevant for their purpose. Kourtis Kazoullis (forthcoming) points out that this process led to awareness (a) that language is not merely what is codified in a dictionary, (b) that there are differences in the language due to differences in cultures. There is not a symmetrical relationship between words and their meanings in different languages. The creation of the text in English that was finally emailed to the sister-class in Canada entailed extensive description of the meaning of the issues discussed as well as drawings created by the students.

Another example concerned a project on ancient Rhodes initiated by a request from the Canadian sister classes to have information on this issue. In the preparation phase the students discussed with their teachers about what they usually 'see' of ancient Rhodes when come to school each day. This included actual sites as well as signposts to these sites. They also worked on the vocabulary they were going to use in writing their texts and they looked for information on the Internet about ancient Greece. In the process they came across an electronic journal about Archeology (DIG, <http://www.dig.archeology.org/>), which included a quiz that students could take. If they gave the right answers they would be nominated 'honorary archeologists'. Here they discovered that the editors of the quiz considered that what they had learned about the subject (the so-called 'Elgin' marbles of Parthenon) at home or at school in Greece was wrong. This caused a 'subproject', which led to the creation of new texts. The students wrote to the editors asking them to correct the quiz according to their suggestions. The feedback they received from the editors (one of whom acknowledged that their suggestions were to be taken seriously, and another who claimed that their suggestions could not be taken into account) initiated discussions in the classroom and with the sister class through extensive e-mail exchanges about the content of knowledge in different settings. Furthermore, getting a response from the editors made the students realize that their letter (their text) had an impact beyond their own classroom.

A third example is the project carried out by all the sister classes. It involved creating and writing down an ending for an unfinished story by Eugenios Trivizas, a well-known Greek children's author. The story, called 'The dance of ostriches', was given

to all classes in both languages. In it, many different animals were confronted with an unfriendly man. The collaboration between the classes included an exchange of information about the different animals in Greece and Canada that they were going to use in the story. Some of the animals chosen by the students in Canada are not found in Greece (e.g. the raccoon) and have no Greek name. The collaboration also entailed thoughts and suggestions about the outcome of the story as well as editing and re-editing of the published work. At the same time the students could consult a literature expert. The expert responded to every single e-mail message using the target language, rewarding the students and giving further suggestions. The students produced ca. 120 different 'endings' of the story. This number of the texts illustrates how enthused the students became in carrying out this project, despite the fact that some of them had limited knowledge of English.

Finally, I would like to refer to an example of scaffolding for both teachers and students with limited computing skills: 'My electronic computer book' was designed by Kourtis Kazoullis (Kourtis Kazoullis 2000, <http://www.rhodes.aegean.gr/gr/progra/dialogos>) to help also students to improve both their English and their computing skills. Using the book (that was offered on-line) to learn how to deal with the computer, the students were given the Greek meaning of different words in the form of integrated hypertexts. If they already knew the meaning they could ignore the explanations and proceed at their own tempo. They could also add to the book new 'pages' with their own suggestions about computing. Both languages were employed but the main objective was to use the target language as a tool for developing computing skills and to let students influence the development of the 'book'.

Problems during the implementation

During the implementation of the sister class project we faced both problems in the actual classroom and problems related to the response of the sister classes. The students in Greece were very much depending on the response of their peers in the sister class. Delayed or no response caused frustration that had to be resolved by connecting class to class in the different schools involved in the project or by an adult who contributed his/her expertise in carrying out a project. It was suggested to the Greek students that the classes in Greece could be connected, but this was not accepted by the students as the 'diversity' that made the sister class pairs appealing

would not be a factor. The students felt that they had nothing to gain by connecting to a class that spoke the same language as them.

We realized that being part of a pair means a lot of investment in communication and presupposes prompt response from both sides. So, our sister class project that was designed as a small scale partnership in comparison to large school networks was threatened by collapse not because of its small scale, but because it was not *personal* enough. It required a lot of management from our side to keep students involved in activities that were supposed to be carried out commonly but there was not enough feedback from the sister class.

At the same time we faced problems relating to the student/teacher relationship and the changing of the teacher's role. The traditional pattern in the school class relies entirely on a teacher who knows the subject matter and on students who are expected to have made this information their own in varying degrees by the end of the school year. When a student has English as first or second language, this might mean that the student displays a skill (e.g. a better accent) in more sophisticated ways than his/her teacher could do. In the IT environment students also displayed computing skills they had already developed at home and continued to develop at a faster tempo than their teachers. The EFL-teachers we have worked with had minimal to no computing skills at the beginning of the project. We observed that some quickly lost confidence with the result that he/she preferred relatively limited activities like searching for information or exchanging e-mails rather than trying to expand the options of working with IT (Dimitrakopoulou 2000). Similar problems appeared among the students themselves who were working together in a mixed ability group at the same computer. We observed that students who had developed a certain level of skill went on using the same skills rather than developing new ones (e.g. a student with computing skills develops computing skills rather than language skills). The significant problem though seemed to be the fact that IT represents an 'unstable environment' in many aspects: technology is still something fragile. In the case of remote islands where connecting to the world is needed most we often faced temporary lapses due to technical problems. It also remains to be established how far the IT learning environment can be integrated with more traditional parts of the curriculum or whether it will completely replace the old ways of learning. Murray (2000) emphasizes the unstable nature of an IT environment from a different point of view. She draws attention to the management of access into multiple sources of information

through links to hypertexts. The organization of hypertexts affects the student's approach to learning, because it brings him/her to sources that are considered relevant by the person who designed the links but not necessarily by the student himself/herself. The links to hypertexts can be extended even further by teachers as well as by the students themselves. The result can be a 'landscape' of hypertexts which the students feel confused and unwilling to deal with.

5. Conclusion

Our experience up to now allows a tentative conclusion, i.e. creating a sister class community in an IT environment represents a promising way of making learning meaningful for our students. Nevertheless things do not happen automatically. New ways of negotiation have to be explored in order to redefine the roles of teacher and student, the process of learning, and the outcomes of learning. Constructing knowledge on the basis of students' experience within a community of dialogic inquiry in the classroom, allows the widening of scaffolding and the integration of everyday knowledge into the process of learning. As regards pedagogy, the sister class presents an opportunity for discussing the possibility of extending constructivist programs into transformative ones.

The sister class presented here did not employ any specific software other than the tools offered on the Internet. However if we have an 'international' language, like English, paired to a 'small' language, like Greek, we have to structure their relationship in the context of sister class networks in a way that assures their equal operation. In this sense it is necessary to explore the possibilities offered by software designed for the on-line learning of second languages in order to see how compatible they are with the theoretical principles of the project as well as how far they can guarantee for equal representation of the languages involved.

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