

Enhancing Language Skills for Intercultural Communication in the Hellenic Civil Service: The case of the Hellenic National Centre of Public Administration and Local Government

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Abstract

The main focus of this article is to investigate the correlation of the use of foreign languages within the workplace emphasising the intercultural skills that are gained and are necessary in the working environment of the Hellenic civil service. The article is based on the general assumption that knowledge of one or more foreign languages is a daily necessity for European civil servants, since it is necessary for them to communicate fluently in a foreign language and at the same time adapt themselves in accordance to the current needs that are confronted with both at work place and in social circles within the framework of the objectives of lifelong learning. The main subject of the investigation is the incorporation, adaptation and integration of the European language policy to the Hellenic lifelong learning training policy. The main scope of this policy is to create a different mentality and a suitable environment on language issues for the civil servants, taking into account all the social and professional particularities of the civil servants, always within the context of lifelong education and training in foreign languages. The case study of the article will analyze the main aspects of the training in foreign languages offered in the academic units of the Hellenic National Centre of Public Administration and Local Government namely the National School of Public Administration and Local Government and the Institute of Training. The aspects to be examined will be in terms of detection of training needs of the civil servants, definition of the target groups' characteristics, the methodology used and the knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired through experiential learning.

Keywords: foreign languages in the civil service, communication, interculturalism, experiential learning, lifelong learning

1. Introduction

In an ever-expanding socio-cultural environment, which is directly affected by the development of technology and Knowledge Society (Ματθαίου, 2008), languages emerge more than ever as a means of communication among people and cultures. Within the European Union (European Commission, 2011), it has become clear that the learning of foreign languages facilitates the achievement of objectives relating to mobility, new job opportunities and social cohesion.

The phrase ‘Languages open doors’ (Europa.eu, 2016), which is one of the central mottos of the European Year of Languages 2001 shows that the linguistic horizons for European citizens have both personal and social character. Through language learning,

citizens can express their thoughts and expectations, and at the same time communicate culture. Using their knowledge of languages, citizens can move to other countries for social, educational and professional purposes. Through language learning, they learn to respect the characteristics of other people, accept diversity and broaden their lifelong education.

In the member states of the European Union, learning more than one foreign language is a key objective of compulsory education. The motto is «1+2» (Trim, J.L.M., Van Ek, J.A, 1984). This fact, together with their native language learning, gives students the opportunity to learn two more foreign languages. So, in a world where mobility is a fact and sometimes a necessity and communication with other people is immediate with the help of technology, it is expected that individuals will acquire a ‘multilingual’ skill. However, the need for language learning is not limited to groups of young age. Individuals can learn languages at all ages depending on the cultural, social or professional interests. Language learning by adults, taken in the context of lifelong learning (Brookfield, SD, 1986) is an objective of personal initiative, caused mainly by the desire to either acquire a new foreign language or improve the already existing foreign language knowledge. Language learning by adults is not only limited to the expansion and acquisition of skills for employability or career development, but also it satisfies needs related to the adult’s personal development.

2. Language Communication and Culture

‘Those who know nothing of foreign languages know nothing of their own.’

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

‘Language learning opens the windows of our minds’, said the Secretary General of the Council of Europe at the opening Day of Languages on 26th September 2004 (Europa.eu, 2016). However, in order to understand this, it would be useful to delineate the key words of the paper and present the link between them. The concept of language includes features such as the inherent power of the people to express themselves. The human being, thus, is a communicative being. So, as linguistic communication, we consider the adaptability of the language in the written and spoken word, the extralinguistic communication (signals, signs, symbols, pictures, gestures) as well as the massive and public communication (Κέφης, B., 1998). As culture, we consider all the achievements of the human being associated with the technical, economic and scientific development and progress, inner cultivation (moral and aesthetic consciousness), the ideals (justice, freedom, humanism) and lifestyle (morale, main cultural currents, values and beliefs) (Unesco, 2008).

It is evident from this brief term analysis that culture is based mainly on language and communication. In this way, the European citizen has the opportunity to learn and experience other cultures through travelling and learning foreign languages. Learning foreign languages is the powerful multicultural tool for creating an interactive, peaceful society which is promoting an acceptance of other cultures, different lifestyles and beliefs (Μάγος, K., 2005). Language explains in the most subtle and detailed way the issues of greatest relevance and importance to the value system of each culture. In other words, language reflects culture by communicating the evolution of a society internally

as well as its correlation with other societies. Language skills and culture provide the framework through which people communicate experience and understand reality.

2.1 The European Language Policy for Public Administration and Local Government

The European Language Policy for the civil service aims at a greater cultural understanding among the Member States of the European Union (C.U.P., (2001). The linguistic diversity of the EU can be transformed from a communication barrier to a source of enrichment and mutual understanding of its Member members. Through a better knowledge of European modern languages, communication and interaction among Europeans of different mother tongues is facilitated, while such knowledge helps the promotion of European mobility, mutual understanding and cooperation, and exemption from prejudice and discrimination. Furthermore, it helps the development of common educational policy principles for language learning and achieves greater convergence of Member States' policies at European level through agreements for constant and ongoing cooperation.

The abolition of the borders among European countries and the increased opportunities and obligations of the civil servants for mobility and cooperation with their counterparts from other Member States results in the constant and increasingly necessary improvement and expansion of foreign language skills. The civil servants should acquire specific language skills and expertise through training in order to wholly fulfill their duties. For the civil servants, especially the newly-appointed ones, the knowledge of foreign languages is considered a compulsory professional qualification. For this reason, the establishment of common levels of language skills that are promoted through the Common European Framework safeguards the standards of language learning to the civil servants.

3. Language Learning in the Hellenic National Centre of Public Administration and Local Government

The Hellenic National Centre of Public Administration and Local Government is the national strategic authority for the educational and vocational training of the executives of Public Administration and Local Government. It consists of two academic units, the National School of Public Administration and Local Government and the Institute of Training. Its governing structure is composed by a President and a 14-member administrative board, a 9-member scientific board, a team of scientists and management executives and a vast number of freelance teaching staff. The mission of the Institute of Training is to improve the efficiency of the human resources in the civil service through certified training programs. The purpose of the Hellenic National School of Public Administration and Local Government is to provide the civil service with highly educated/trained civil servants of fast promotion, capable of responding to the new challenges the Hellenic Civil Service is faced with. A lot of importance is given to the ‘Four P’s’ of the civil servants which are: Pride (civil servants should take pride in the value they add and the services they deliver to the public), Passion (civil servants should care about their work and the people they serve), Pace (the civil servant needs to ensure it gets on with the job as quickly as possible and provides value for money) and Professionalism (this can be achieved by constantly lifting standards and promoting a culture that values lifelong learning).

The training of the civil servants in foreign languages is based on thematic units of both personal and professional interests. One of the main objectives is training through specially designed courses in order to produce civil servants capable of meeting the requirements of European citizens and solving problems by taking creative initiatives. The strategy followed by the department of foreign languages is the organization and implementation of training courses which meet the needs of the civil servants and at the same time integrate the parameters set by the European Union for a modern civil service. In this way, the educational process seeks to improve and adapt the civil servants' already existing knowledge of foreign languages in order to enhance their administrative capacity creating a culture of European standards. In addition to that, the offered language training programs aim to equip their participants with specialised knowledge and skills in foreign languages, handling specific ESP issues and terminology related to their workplace and their professional obligations, familiarizing them with European and international institutions. For example, in the Hellenic National School of Public Administration and Local Government, future civil servants are taught two foreign languages, English on a compulsory basis (C2 level) and French, German, Italian and Spanish as a free choice at whichever level they wish (A1-C2) (Approved by the Board of EKDDA meeting of March 28, 2016).

3.1 Target Group and Detection of Training Needs

3.1.1 Target Group of the Hellenic National School of Public Administration and Local Government

The founding Law of the Hellenic National Centre of Public Administration and Local Government (N.1388/1983) defines the graduates of the National School of Public Administration and Local Government as 'managers'. More specifically, it is an academy which creates high-ranked civil servants for both the central or decentralized administration (From data and information collected and kept by the Administrative Department of the Academy).

When designing and implementing the curriculum of the academy, the research and studies officers take into account the basic characteristics of the candidates such as age and work experience in the private or public sector. As far as the last two educational series are concerned the statistical analysis shows that the students are of average age about 34 years old, with high level of education (45% has a postgraduate degree while 10 of the students have a PhD) and professional experience both in the private and public sector. Their motives for taking part in such a demanding examination procedure are the present fiscal restrictions and difficult situation of the labor market, their professional ambitions, the promising career in the public sector, the secure environment and the steady income. Other factors are the better quality of life with less working hours, permanence and relatively quick promotion opportunities.

3.1.2 Target Group of the Institute of Training

This target group consists of civil servants, of middle and senior ranking, heads of units, deputy managers, managers and general managers. The training programs in foreign languages take place outside their working hours (From data and information collected and kept by the Administrative Department of the Institute of Training). Their language learning incentives are socio-professional and socio-cultural. They believe that improving their language skills is necessary at their workplace in order to help them get

a promotion. In this way, they will gain more confidence in the performance of their duties having the opportunity to travel abroad. Usually, the time they can devote to learning a foreign language is limited, as they have family obligations or other personal commitments. The level of their linguistic ability when they enter the course is not stable and it depends on factors such as prior learning of the target language, the time and level of it, the previous experience in its use for vocational and personal reasons. As adult learners, they are accompanied by a set of experiences and values and are constantly after the educational process. They come to the training courses with already existing intentions and expectations regarding the learning process, having already formed their own learning models and having competing interests (Rogers, A, 1996). However, as civil servants, they involve in an ongoing process of lifelong education in various training programs that the Institute offers.

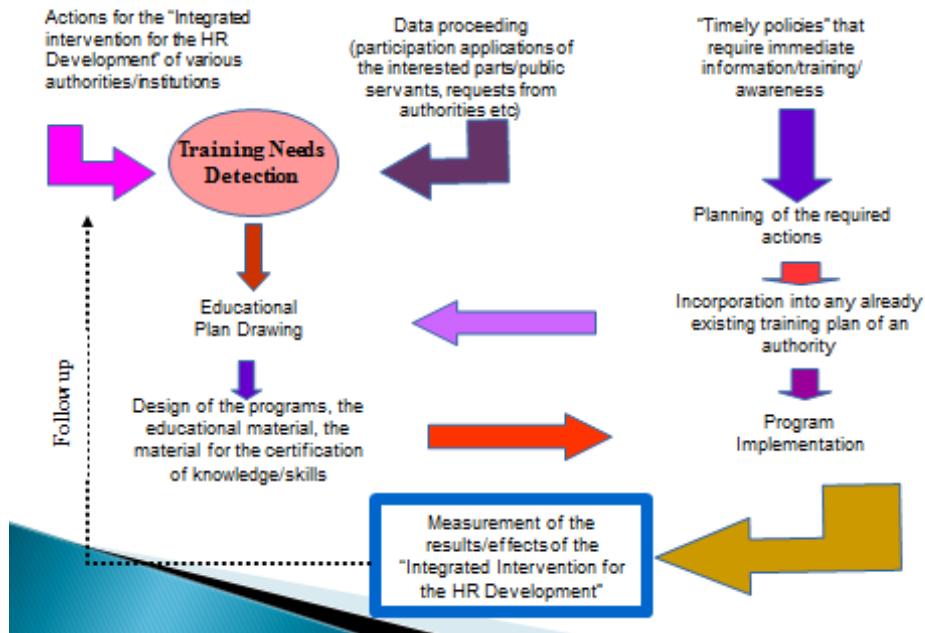
3.2 Detection of Training Needs

The new challenges that the Hellenic civil service faces are mobility, reform of the Hellenic administration and fiscal restrictions. The rising role of education and lifelong learning in EU together with a new balance between public and private sector and the current and future global trends and uncertainties are also a fact to be considered. The training programs designed include important changes in the fields of planning, methodology and organization of training aiming at the improvement of the already existing training which is based on strategic points emphasised by each individual department of Public Administration as well as the priorities put forward by National Policies, the respect in the needs of the citizens and the use and positive exploitation of the opportunities provided by E-Government. In addition, one of the basic aims is the organization of new training activities in the form of innovative workshops for the elaboration of policy papers for key domains of the governmental policy.

The basic elements in the analysis of the training needs to be considered are:

- Tracing the needs from the perspective of the participants compared with their professional and personal needs and peculiarities.
- Tracing the needs from the perspective of the participants compared with the methods and content of the training program.
- Tracing the needs from the perspective of the Centre in relation to the objectives it has set with respect to language training participants and evaluation methods and content of the training program
- Tracing needs from the perspective of the central and local administration concerning: a) the resources available, b) the objectives, and the c) educational training programs (See scheme below)

Integrated Intervention for the Public Services' HR Development



The above mentioned language needs (Richterich, R., (ed), 1983) seem to be identical with the language requirements arising from the use of a foreign language in a variety of communication professional or social circumstances. That is why the basic need to learn foreign languages is to improve the capacity of the civil servants in agreement with the objectives set by the European Union for a modern civil service. When the foreign language is used for business purposes, the basic communication needs are mostly common to all civil service, while differences can be remarked to the use of specialised vocabulary related to issues of intra-service and inter-service level.

4. Educational Approach and Methodology 'mind is not a vessel to fill, but a fire to light'

One of the most critical factors of the effectiveness of adult education is to develop teaching methods that encourage active participation of learners in the process of learning through experiential methods. The educational approach and methodology (IEEE, 2010) followed in terms of language learning is training centered on the participants' needs through an intensive learning process on issues directly related to their workplace and interests. The adopted learning process leads to improving the quality and efficiency of the people who attend the language courses.

The methodology focuses on the promotion of modern interactive educational methods and training techniques. The goal is anthropocentric and the effort continues to place particular emphasis on expertise in specific issues and terminology. Experiential education leads to a more effective participation in productive activities coming directly from the civil service. There is extensive training in understanding written and spoken skills, which give in a short period of time actual possibilities of communication and exchange of information with other EU civil servants, respecting interculturalism (Γεωργογιάννης, Π., 1999) and facilitating mobility. The use of technology improves skills in presentations, conferences international meetings and so on. It is considered a

necessity to be trained in direct and reverse translation which helps in the understanding of EU regulations and texts in relation to the legislation as well as in terminology and specific issues in core areas of the civil service.

4.1 Knowledge-Skills-Attitudes

The teaching of foreign languages provides the civil servants with an opportunity to continue the language training they have received in the past and enrich it. They can even begin to learn a new foreign language from the beginning. Classroom work, aims both at acquiring knowledge about the language itself (grammar and syntax) and at the same time improves skills for a conscious use of the language in social context. This lines with modern theories of adult learning formulated in Europe and Greece, according to which language should be regarded as an independent concept system, in which words and sentences acquire their meaning depending on the use of language in a particular communicative context and in specific social situations (Kolb, D., 1984).

In the process of learning a foreign language, the participant is considered as a member of a society, which has to perform a specific task in a specific communication context and in specific communicative situations (Κόκκος, Α., 1998). The instructor must activate his own skills and strategies, pumping ideas and emotions from his own knowledge background, feelings, desires and abilities in order to be successful. It is assumed that adults have acquired general knowledge, either empirical or academic, and through language training in their native language (L1) they have developed relevant skills and awareness of how language works in a variety of communicative contexts. They expect that they can transfer the already acquired knowledge and skills when learning a foreign language (L2) in the new context of learning, so as to enrich their language training either in the classroom or independently. Given the level of knowledge and experiences of the participants, it is expected that when learning a foreign language, they will have the opportunity to transfer their knowledge of their native language and adapt it to enrich with elements of L1 culture as well as to improve their ability to communicate in L2. In addition to that, participants should develop knowledge and experience on basic social practices and attitudes of societies in which the target language is used as a communication means, together with the customs and traditions of these societies and the ways in which interpersonal relationships are developed in these societies. Through both the teaching and learning of the L2 intercultural awareness is expected to develop (Σηφάκης, N.K., 2012).

The parallel use of L1 and L2, also known as mediation (Robinson, P., 1991) is also very important, so that the message is clear and understood by someone who is not a native speaker. At the same time, participants need to acquire experience in specific communication skills (language for specific purposes such as business, public sector and others), so they can respond to communication needs associated with their professional interests or work. Finally, one of the main aims of lifelong learning autonomy in learning achieved through seeking resources and information according to the trainees' needs and objectives (Courau, S., 2005).

4.2 Principles of Adult Education and Experiential Learning

Adult civil servants who attend language courses as part of their lifelong learning education have some common characteristics, such as previous experience (social,

occupational, educational), interests (personal, business) and motivation to learn (Alptekin, C., 2010). In order to be effective, the adult lifelong learning education should combine thought and action through the learning process, which develops in successive stages and interdependently. The heart of the educational process are the participants, taking into account their specific needs, which have to do on the one hand with the time adults devote to education and the practical usefulness of the course and their varied interests on the other. Additionally, teaching should allow them to actively participate in the process of learning. The involvement of adult participants in determining the objectives and content of the course, their ability of drawing conclusions that leads to self-assessment, increases motivation for learning and enhances self-awareness and creativity. Using the experience and knowledge, critical thinking is promoted allowing them to penetrate to new knowledge, exploring and critically shaping attitudes and opinions.

In order for all the above to be feasible and achievable, the instructor of the program should organize the teaching methodology accordingly. As mentioned above, the basic group-aim is not to learn a foreign language from ‘literary interest’, but to experience the immediate usefulness of language skills to the civil servants’ professional, social and personal life as the main motivation of trainees. However, learning a language is a process that takes time and effort, no matter how interesting and fun the lesson can be. The fact that the target group learns the foreign language outside their working hours and that the time for studying is limited, the issue of motivation and sustaining interest becomes a major parameter. In order for trainees not to feel that they are ‘wasting their time’, and in order to motivate their active participation in the course, the instructor must make sure that they realize and understand the progress they are making in the foreign language and its usefulness. So, the instructor, from the beginning must link the linguistic phenomena with their everyday use and application in communicative situations coming from the participants’ professional, social and personal daily life.

These are realized through techniques of experiential learning which emphasizes the important role played by experience in the learning process. Experiential learning responds to the need of developing the whole personality of the individual and not only his cognitive improvement. The idea of experiential knowledge, according to Bakirtzis (Μπακιρτζής K., 2000) aims to create the right environment, which provides the opportunity to gain experiences that will facilitate ‘the intrapsychic processes, the personality and desires, needs, motivations, interests of the trainees’. Experiential learning is an alternative way of education that extends beyond the classroom, books, teaching and memorization (Τριλίρια Σ. & Αναγνωστοπούλου T., 2008). It is the opposite of the traditional teaching methods.

5. Concluding Remarks

The Hellenic National Centre of Public Administration and Local Government through the teaching of foreign languages attempts to improve and adapt the existing knowledge of a foreign language to the administrative capacity of the civil servants, in order to facilitate their mobility in a multilingual and multicultural Europe. It equips them with the specific knowledge and skills needed to handle their professional issues with ease and efficiency, in order to effectively participate both in European Union and internationally. At the same time, it enhances multilingualism in the civil service giving

emphasis on the rich linguistic diversity that exists in Europe and encourages lifelong learning in response to the ongoing economic, social and cultural changes.

The language training programs offered are based on the theoretical premise that language learning should be considered a lifelong experience and a project that is voluntarily undertaken in order to satisfy personal, professional or academic pursuits. Through the use of the foreign language learning the civil servant develops skills that can be used in various social and professional environments. The aim of these training programs is to meet both the immediate and long-term needs of adult learners. For this purpose, it is taken into account the professional and learning backgrounds of the participants, their expectations, the Hellenic social reality and the European dimension in teaching and learning languages.

The structure of the language training program should ensure a comprehensive and coherent framework within which a wide range of knowledge, abilities and skills are identified and which the trainees are expected to develop at each level of proficiency. The topics and the language content are based on the social and professional experiences of the participants and arouse the interest for motivated learning. The activities take into account previous learning experiences of the participants and enhance their active participation in the learning process.

The organization of the courses are student-oriented in order to provide an encouraging environment for the development of social skills and provide opportunities for internships so that their already existing professional expertise and life experience will be incorporated in the teaching process. The teaching process includes activities that promote interaction and mediation. Based on what is mentioned above, the teaching of the language phenomena is not done in isolation, but always in a communicative context rich with cultural elements in order to make clear the communicative utility of the linguistic phenomenon and its potential application in communicative situations, related to their professional or social needs. (Content language acquisition). The systematization of what has been learned and the balanced development of all skills is a challenge for instructors while the attempt to give to the trainees the ability to monitor their progress (exercises/self-assessment) using active methods of learning and alternative forms of assessment is a challenge.

The language for specific purposes is included in educational material starting from the very first lesson and gradually increases as we move to a higher level of proficiency. Its integration into the curriculum is indicated with the following quota:

Levels A1 και A2	25 – 30 %
Levels B1 και B2	30 - 60 %
Levels C1 και C2	60 – 90 %

An effort of this kind should result in the need for a meaningful assessment and certification of language skills of the Greek civil servants from a state recognized body to align with the European policy and to promote multilingualism and uniform certification of knowledge of foreign languages through the State Language Certificate

(K.P.G.). Therefore, the proper configuration of the educational programs in order to provide adequate preparation for the K.P.G exam, without at the same time impeding the effective role of the educational process, leads to the creation of special preparatory courses for the K.P.G exam. At the same time self-preparation of the trainees through e-learning are basic steps to be used by the civil service.

Marching towards the future, the main objective is to further improve the administrative capacity of the civil servants in foreign language learning. This can be achieved by expanding into new fields of education by organizing workshops related to the handling of specific issues and terminology, strengthening the perception that the main priority is to associate the knowledge of the foreign language with the main elements of the country's culture whose language is taught. The crisis has encouraged European countries to come together and to share experiences and questions. These networks for the effective transfer of skills and experiences must be further developed. Education and training in foreign languages are central levers not only in tackling the present economic crisis but also in preparing a more sustainable, social and innovative society.

Through the learning of foreign languages, the strengthening of intercultural expression of the civil servants is promoted. They become conscious that they belong to a wider community of cultural values, in which language is the communication tool encouraging and promoting understanding among peoples and creating constructive intercultural dialogue.

‘To have another language is to possess a second soul.’

Charlemagne

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