

# ENHANCING CHILDREN'S EARLY LANGUAGE AND EMERGENT LITERACY IN A GREEK PRE-KINDERGARTEN HERITAGE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM THROUGH A TRANSLINGUAL AND TRANSCULTURAL STANCE

Situé à l'intersection du domaine émergent de l'éducation précoce des langues d'origine et de la pédagogie, cet article présente un projet de recherche-action participative dans une classe de prématernelle d'une école communautaire grecque à Lausanne. Adoptant une orientation translinguistique et transculturelle, il examine les ressources multilingues, multimodales et multisensorielles sur lesquelles les enfants s'appuient pour créer et parler de textes, et s'interroge sur la manière dont ces pratiques linguistiques précoces ainsi que la littéracie en développement des enfants leur ouvrent un espace où articuler leur agentivité. Il montre comment, tout en mettant l'accent sur l'apprentissage de la langue grecque, les autres langues et expériences des enfants sont écoutées et honorées.

● Vally Lytra  
| Goldsmiths, GPT,  
Katerina Darzenta  
| GPT,  
Myrto Atzemian  
| HEP Vaud, GPT,  
Maria Eleftheriou  
Kapartis  
| GPT

## Introduction

This paper is situated at the intersection of the emergent field of early heritage language education and pedagogy. Despite the proliferation of heritage schools worldwide, early heritage language education in these educational settings is beginning to attract attention. Existing studies have examined bilingual pre-schools where the heritage language is being taught; for instance, teachers' pedagogical approaches in a bilingual Russian-Hebrew pre-school in Israel (Schwartz & Minkov, 2022) and teachers' accounts of their challenges and resources in a Korean pre-school in the US (Lee & Bang, 2011) as well as issues in language policy and planning in bilingual pre-school education in Canada (Aravossitas et al., 2022). In this paper we extend this body of work by investigating the creative text-making and talk about texts of a group of children attending a pre-kindergarten class called 'Play and Learn' (Παίζω και Μαθαίνω) at a Greek heritage school in Lausanne. The children in this class speak a wealth of languages besides Greek: French, Spanish, Ukraini-

an, Bulgarian, Lebanese Arabic, and English. At least one of the children's parents is of Greek heritage or has a biographical connection to Greece. All the children were born in Switzerland, and they have been attending French-medium day care from a very young age. French (the dominant societal language) is the stronger language for many children, and they have a wide spectrum of receptive and productive language abilities in Greek. The linguistic and cultural diversities manifested in this class are increasingly representative of many Greek diaspora families worldwide (Panagiotopoulou et al., 2019).

Our work contributes to recent calls for listening to young children's voices, narratives, and experiences in early language learning contexts (Mhic Mhathúna & Hayes, 2022). We scrutinize the multilingual, multimodal, and multisensorial resources the children draw upon in their creative text-making and talk about their texts and interrogate how these early language and emergent literacy practices open a space for children to articulate their agentive voices. The study adopts a

translingual and transcultural orientation to language and language learning. This orientation takes a broad view of language that encompasses children's full range of semiotic repertoires, aesthetic resources, and multimodal practices (Lytra et al., 2022). It proposes a dynamic, fluid, and contingent understanding of language and highlights the interdependence of language and culture. It embraces not only the instructional and formal aspects of language learning but also emphasises the multimodal, multi-sensory, aesthetic, personal and affective elements. In this sense it moves away from dominant rationalist and pragmatic approaches to language teaching and learning. It focuses on the transformative process of language learning and how it might reconfigure existing communicative resources and nurture new ways of being, seeing, feeling, and expressing in the world (ibid; also, Leung & Scarino, 2016; Phipps, 2019; Ros i Solé, 2016).

### Working synergetically in a pre-kindergarten heritage language classroom

Like many heritage schools in Switzerland representing languages that are not widely spoken in broader society or taught in the official school system, the Greek school Grec Pour Tous is a grass-roots initiative spearheaded by a group of parents and teachers. It is the product of the 'new' Greek family migration that has populated the shores of Lake Geneva as a result of the Greek government debt crisis in 2009 and its aftermath. The children's families have high SES and equally high expectations for their children's Greek language and culture development. Moreover, policy changes in Greek heritage language education abroad since 2011 have resulted in the transfer of the administrative and financial responsibilities of maintaining many Greek heritage schools to parents, diaspora institutions and communities. Founded in 2017, the school offers Greek language and culture education for children aged 2.5 to 16 and adult learners of Greek. It employs an individualized and cross-curricular approach to pedagogy where Greek is taught through literature, history, mythology, and the arts, firmly rooted in students' real-life experiences and encounters living and learning in a multiethnic city.

The paper reports on a collaboration between the four authors from September 2021 to June 2022. Katerina Darzenta and Myrto Atzemian are class teachers and Maria Eleftheriou Kapartis is headteacher. They are all qualified Greek language teachers. Vally Lytra is a researcher-educator and has been supporting the heritage language teachers in developing the curriculum and teaching methods. In this capacity she observed and co-taught 11 sessions of the pre-kindergarten class over the course of the school year. This collaboration grew out of the pedagogical necessity to rethink and adapt the curriculum and teaching methods to respond to the increasingly heterogeneous cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional needs of the youngest children in the school and to mentor and support the heritage language teachers with the purpose of developing and expanding their practice. It has had a cyclical and iterative nature. The heritage language teachers prepared the weekly scheme of work which they shared with the headteacher and the researcher-educator. This was followed by short feedback discussions over email to fine-tune the content, materials, and teaching methods for each session. During sessions, the researcher-educator kept a reflective research diary and collected photographs and short videos of classroom interactions. The data collected served as points for further collective reflection in post-session discussions and for future planning. Moreover, insights from the data were shared in the form of informal feedback to parents at the end of each session and in formal parent-teacher meetings held twice yearly. In this paper we present two illustrative examples from one of the video recordings where the children are sharing and discussing their text-making with the researcher-educator accompanied by photographs of their text-making.

Dr Vally Lytra is Reader in Languages in Education at Goldsmiths, University of London and a researcher-educator advocating for and studying Greek community language education in Switzerland since 2009.



Katerina Darzenta is a Greek language teacher and an early years' practitioner working in a Swiss daycare centre for infants.



Myrto Atzemian is a Greek language teacher and PhD candidate in special education at HEP Vaud.



Maria Eleftheriou Kapartis is an experienced Greek language teacher and head teacher.



**We scrutinize the multilingual, multimodal, and multisensorial resources the children draw upon in their creative text-making and talk about their texts and interrogate how these early language and emergent literacy practices open a space for children to articulate their agentive voices.**

## Navigating languages and literacies and making sense of the word and the world

'Play and Learn' has been conceived as a local response to parental desire for age-appropriate early (pre-kindergarten) Greek language education. It recognises the significance of structured early exposure to heritage language learning, and it is designed to respond to the increased heterogeneity of children's linguistic and cultural repertoires and family migration histories (Schwartz & Palviainen 2016). Its objective is to instil a life-long love for Greek and Greek language learning by responding to each child's unique emotional, linguistic, cognitive, and social needs and well-being. Pedagogically, it seeks to socialise children into early language and emergent literacy in Greek, increase their confidence in language and literacy and set the foundations for their successful transition to kindergarten and formal literacy in subsequent years. This is achieved through a playful approach to language learning that mines aesthetic, personal and affective elements. This pedagogical approach resonates with what García and Sylvan (2011) have referred to as teaching for 'singularities in pluralities' (: 386).

Image 1



The arts-based activity, which is the focus of this paper, was part of a larger whole school project on raising children's environmental awareness that span over several sessions. For this purpose, the school had paired with the Greek NGO 'Arcturos' who delivered an online environmental education programme to sensitize children to the protection of brown bears. This partnership led to the subsequent adoption of two bears, Masa and Bruno, by the children. The children in the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classes worked together to create a large collage about the two bears featuring their habitat and the need to protect it from wildfires, what bears like eating and how to show their love of them (image 1). Sitting in groups of four, the children were immersed in colouring in the images for the collage, singing and chatting to each other. The heritage language teachers and researcher-educator moved around the groups commenting on and talking with the children about their creative text-making. From a pedagogical perspective, they sought to elicit children's spontaneous responses and

engage them in productive language use. They incorporated target vocabulary as naturally as possible and modelled the target language. In excerpt 1, G., M., and O. are colouring in their pears (one type of food that bears eat) for the bear collage.

### Excerpt 1:

**1 V:** και εσύ Γ. τι ζωγραφίζεις; <and you G. what are you drawing?>

**2 G:** το μπλε <blue>

**3 V:** ένα μπλε αχλάδι; Είναι το αγαπημένο σου χρώμα για αυτό το χρησιμοποιείς; <a blue pear? Is this your favourite colour, is this why you are using it?> [G. nods his head]

**4 M:** και εμένα και εμένα το αγαπημένο μου χρώμα <it's my it's my favourite colour too>

**5 V:** το μπλε ή το πράσινο <blue or green> [M. was coloring with a green marker]

**6 M:** το μπλε <blue>

Image 2: Colouring in pears for Masa and Bruno's collage



G. (age 3.5) explains that he is using blue to colour his pear (his artwork is on the bottom left of image 2). When asked if this is his favourite colour, he nods his head. M. (age 3.5) who is colouring the leaf of her pear green (her artwork is located on the bottom right of image 2) self-selects and confidently shares that blue is her favourite colour too. In excerpt 2 which follows right after, O. (age 4.5) states that he has finished his artwork (top left of image 2). When asked about what look like a series of circles on the back of his sheet (image 3), O. points with his marker at each circle, and starts reciting the Greek alphabet 'α- λφα μπί- τα' <a- lfa- bi- ta>. About the fifth circle he adds that it represents 'mummy and daddy'. His mark making suggests that he has become aware of the correspondence between oral and visual rep-

resentations, and that marks on a sheet of paper communicate meaning (the letters of the Greek alphabet or the words ‘daddy and mummy’). As an emergent writer, O.’s mark making allows him to explore written communication and produce his own approximations of writing.

**Excerpt 2:**

**7 O:** j'ai fini <all done>

**8 V:** τελείωσες; <have you finished?>  
για πες μας τι έχεις ζωγραφίσει; <tell us what have you drawn?>

**9 O:** α- λφα μπί-τα <a- lfa- bi- ta> [recites the beginning of the alphabet pointing with his marker at each circle]

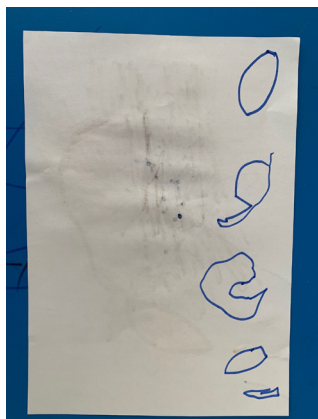
**10 V:** και μετά από κάτω; <and underneath?>

**11 O:** παρα, μαμά ετ ο μπαμπάς <daddy, mummy and daddy>

**12 V:** πολύ ωραία <nice work>

29.1.2022

**Image 3:** O.’s letters of the Greek alphabet



Seen through a translingual and trans-cultural stance, the children draw on the full range of their multilingual, multimodal, and multisensorial resources to inscribe their ideas, preferences, and desires in their creative text-making. Central to this stance is the recognition of children as knowledgeable and active meaning makers (Gregory et al., 2004) and an ethical commitment to making their voices heard (Lytra et al., 2017). This stance attends to children’s creativity, intentionality, and expertise, as they exercise agency over how they construct knowledge and come to make sense of the world and their place within it. Although the school has an explicit Greek monolingual language policy and heritage language teachers actively facilitate ‘language separation practices’ to boost Greek language use during instruction, we concurrently observed ‘flexible lan-

**We scrutinize the multilingual, multimodal, and multisensorial resources the children draw upon in their creative text-making and talk about their texts and interrogate how these early language and emergent literacy practices open a space for children to articulate their agentive voices.**

guage practices’ that combine elements of Greek, French and other languages (Blackledge & Creese, 2010). Elsewhere Lytra (2022) has documented the tensions pertaining to flexible language use (such as the purposeful use of translation as communicative resource) in pedagogy in Greek heritage language schools: on the one hand, such practices are viewed as ‘communicatively and pedagogically valuable’, as a resource that corresponds to each child’s unique emotional, linguistic, cognitive, and social needs. On the other hand their use ‘all the time and/or without a specific pedagogical purpose did not appear to be appropriate or legitimate in a Greek language instructional setting’ (: 82). Indeed, children’s flexible language practices is a source of anxiety for heritage language teachers prompting ongoing reflections and discussions about how to reduce traces of other languages in children’s speech (cf. Karatsareas, 2021 for similar findings in Greek heritage schools in the UK).

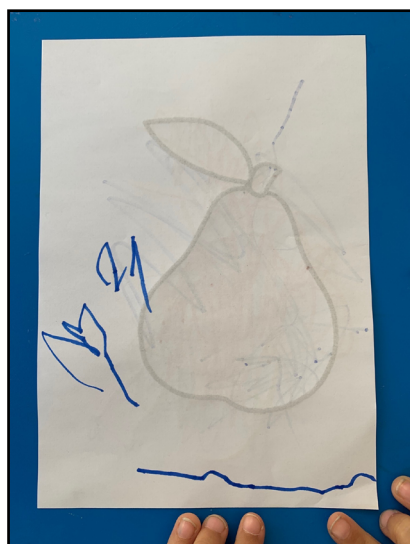
Nevertheless, children in the pre-kindergarten class routinely translanguage integrating elements from Greek and French in their speech to express new meanings, personal experiences, and emotions. For instance, O. in excerpt 2 translanguages to successfully attract adult attention, self-select and take the next turn (line 7) and to share, explain and elaborate on his mark making to his audience (lines 9, 11). Unlike studies in early years settings that focus on how the minority language can support the learning of the societally majority language (see, for instance, Mary & Young, 2017), here French is used to scaffold Greek language learning. O.’s verbal performance is consistent with a translinguaging perspective that has postulated the breaking down of boundaries of socially named languages in language user’s minds (Li, 2011).

In addition to spoken language, children convey meaning in multiple modes, using visual, gestural, tactile, and spatial systems. Children across the age groups populated their artwork with their mark making and other meaning-making resources (e.g., lines, hearts, stars, a smiley sun) in the margins and on the back of their sheets (see image 4). They made creative decisions, deploying different tools (markers, crayons, pencils, glitter markers), manipulating colour and texture and combining different symbolic systems (visual, gestural, tactile) which prioritised their personal interests and experiences (such as choice of favourite colour in excerpt 1). Like Charalambous' (2022) study with primary school children's digital text-making in a London Greek heritage school, these practices 'activated their agency and enhanced their confidence and engagement' (: 200). In both excerpts, M. and O. take initiative to self-select and voice their aesthetic sensibilities and create new possibilities for meaning making that expand the colouring activity, drawing connections with the family and the wider world. They unite prior and new experiences and build their own understandings of their creative text-making which they confidently share in Greek and their other languages with their teachers and peers. The children's multimodal engagement functions as a resource to scaffold and facilitate early language and emergent literacy in Greek. While the emphasis is on Greek language learning, children's other languages and lived experiences are listened to and honoured.

## Conclusion

This paper examined children's early language and emergent literacy in a Greek pre-kindergarten heritage language classroom. It illustrated how a translingual and transcultural stance decentres 'dominant paradigms of language and language education that continue to be based on static notions of language as code, as a rule-governed system that is coterminous with stable communities and identities and on prescriptive pedagogical and language assessment models' (Lytra et al. 2022: 1). It emphasises instead the different ways children agentively combined elements of their multilingual, multimodal, and multisensory resources to express their aesthetic preferences and articulate understandings of their texts that matter to them. Li's (2011) notion of 'translanguaging space' is useful to conceptualize the creative, playful, and transformative nature of children's text-making and talk about text documented in this paper. As Li (2011) remarks, this is 'not a space where different identities, values and practices simply co-exist, but combine together to generate new identities, values and practices' (: 1223). Heritage language teachers have an important role to play in supporting pedagogic practices that co-create such 'translanguaging spaces' with young children so that the later can safely leverage their entire meaning-making repertoires, fuelling their early language and emergent literacy in the heritage language and unlocking their personal worlds.

Image 4



**The children's multimodal engagement functions as a resource to scaffold and facilitate early language and emergent literacy in Greek. While the emphasis is on Greek language learning, children's other languages and lived experiences are listened to and honoured.**

## Acknowledgements

*We would like to thank the children and their families for participating in this study. This paper celebrates their passion and commitment to sustain Greek language learning abroad.*



## References

- Aravossitas, T. et al.** (2022) Perspectives on Heritage Language Programs in Early Childhood Education in Canada. In: M. Schwartz (Ed) *Handbook of Early Childhood Education*. Cham Switzerland: Springer, pp. 725-761.
- Blackledge, A. & Creese, A.** (2010) *Multilingualism: A Critical Perspective*. London: Continuum.
- Charalambous, M.** (2022) Creating Pedagogical Spaces for Translingual and Transcultural Meaning-Making and Student Agency in a London Greek Complementary School. In: V. Lytra et al (Eds) *Liberating Language Education*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 186-204.
- García, O. & Sylvan, C.E.** (2011) Pedagogies and Practices in Multilingual Classrooms: Singularities in Pluralities. *The Modern Language Journal*, 95 (3), 385-400.
- Gregory, E. et al.** (2004) *Many Pathways to Literacy: Young Children Learning with Siblings, Grandparents, Peers and Communities*. London: Routledge
- Karatsareas, P.** (2021) The UK's Shifting Diasporic Landscape: Negotiating Ethnolinguistic Heterogeneity in Greek Complementary Schools Post-2010. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 269: 99-121.
- Lee, S., & Bang, Y.** (2011) Listening to Teacher Lore: The Challenges and Resources of Korean Heritage Language Teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27, 387-394.
- Leung, C. & Scarino, A.** (2016) Reconceptualising the Nature of Goals and Outcomes in Language/s Education. *The Modern Language Journal*, 100 (S1), 81-95.
- Li, W.** (2011) Moment Analysis and Translanguaging Space: Discursive Construction of Identities by Multilingual Chinese Youth in Britain. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43, 1222-1235.
- Lytra, V.** (2022) Making Sense of the Internal Diversities of Greek Schools Abroad: Exploring the Purposeful Use of Translation as Communicative Resource for Language Learning and Identity Construction. In: V. Lytra et al (Eds) *Liberating Language Education*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 72-90.
- Lytra, V. et al.** (Eds) (2022) *Liberating Language Education*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters
- Lytra, V. et al.** (2017) Researching Children's Literacy Practices and Identities in Faith Settings: Multimodal Text-making and Talk about Text as Resources for Knowledge Building. In: Martin-Jones, M. and Martin, D. (Eds) *Researching Multilingualism: Critical and Ethnographic Perspectives*. Abingdon: Routledge, 215-228.
- Mary, L. & Young, A.** (2017) Engaging with Emergent Bilinguals and their Families in the Pre-primary Classroom to Foster Well-being, Learning and Inclusion. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 17(4), 455-473.
- Mhic Mhathúna M., & Hayes, N.** (2022) Ethical Issues in Research with Young Children in Early Second Language Education. In: M. Schwartz (Ed) *Handbook of Early Childhood Education*. Cham Switzerland: Springer, 193-219.
- Phipps, A.** (2019) *Decolonising Multilingualism: Struggles to Decreate*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Ros i Solé, C.** (2016) *The Personal World of the Language Learner*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Schwartz, M. & Minkov, M.** (2022) Making Heritage Language Accessible through "A Trip to the Enchanted Wood". *Language Teaching for Young Learners*. Published online: 4 August 2022
- Schwartz, M. & Palviainen, A.** (2016) Twenty-first-century Preschool Bilingual Education: Facing Advantages and Challenges in Cross-cultural Contexts. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 19(6): 603-613.