Living in the global village. Problems, policies and prospects of foreign language teaching in the primary school.

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Living in the global village has become in our days one of those catch-phrases that on occasions permeate the academic as well as the political jargon. For years now economists insist on the emergence of an increasingly globalized capital market, on the development of a complex international division of labour, on the internationalization of production and on the extra-ordinary growth in international trade. Extensive and quick financial transactions to invest in areas where new opportunities have emerged; the closure of industrial plants in one country and the transfer of their productive activities to another where they can be carried out without political regulation and trade-union challenge; the fast growing and all embracing multinational companies with their sub-contracting and franchising practices are all facts of life that seem today familiar even to the layman. Sociologists, on their part, have warned us of the consequences of rapid and radical technological change that lie on the basis of relevant transformations in the mode of production and in economic life. They have pointed at unemployment which is likely to become a permanent feature of capitalist societies, at the rise of 1/3-2/3 societies and at the diminution, if not dismantling, of the welfare state. Political scientists and the politicians themselves have underlined the decline of the nation state and the urgent demand for the creation of supra-national organizations that could cope more effectively with the problems posed by technological and economic change. Finally the transformation of cultural traits has not also escaped close attention. The internationalization of aesthetic preferences and of the youth culture, the expanding dominance of the material over the intellectual, of individualism over collective action, of competition over cooperation have also been identified and analyzed as a world-wide phenomenon.
Clearly the “global village” in all its conceptual forms has an economic origin and distinct economic connotations. It is the off-spring of post-modern technological change, and a place where everyday transactions of products, services, currencies, people and ideas can take place; a huge and increasingly free market where everyone enjoys the right to buy and sell, to work and produce, to benefit from his inventiveness and adaptability. Or to put it in the words of the European Commission White Paper “Teaching and Learning. Towards the learning society”. “Like the rest of the world, Europe has to face up to the effects of the widespread dissemination of information technologies, pressure on the world market and a relentless onward march of science and technology. These challenges represent a step forward in placing people in a closer relationship with another”. And further on: “The internationalization of the economy is the second factor of upheaval, which has given rise to unprecedented freedom of movement for capital, goods and services”.

Consequently all other aspects of life in the global village arise from and should be in the service of the smooth, unhampered and productive functioning of the economy. Again, the White Paper recognises that “there is a risk of a social rift with all the adverse and even drastic consequences this may entail” if “major adjustments in every country” should not be made.

The primarily economic character of such an analysis justifiably leads to policies in which the economic orientation is pre-eminent. Thus the first target of European policy in facing contemporary challenges, that of the “acquisition of new knowledge” is basically understood as a life long process that would improve individual understanding of socio-economic developments, would facilitate acquisition of vocational skills and hence would increase adaptability to the needs of a Proteus-like economy. Similarly the targets of “bringing schools and the business sector closer together”, of “combating exclusion”, and that of “treating capital investment and investment in training on an equal basis”, all signify steps that
would make the best of human resources in increasing economic competitiveness and productivity, without taking unnecessary risks as far as social cohesion and individual prospects are concerned.

In this context learning a foreign language has also a primarily economic or utilitarian dimension. You need not be an economist, a social analyst or an expert in the functioning of the labour market to understand that he who masters one or more foreign languages is better equipped to find a job and a better one for that matter. Learning a widely-spoken language receives priority among students, although knowledge of a widely spoken language may on occasions prove to be vocationally very useful as well. This is equally true for peoples whose mother tongue is widely spoken and for those that it is not. For obvious reasons an English pupil is, of course, less motivated than his/her Greek or Portuguese schoolmate to learn a foreign language. It is, however, increasingly understood nowadays that economic life in the global village is in linguistic terms equally demanding for him as well. I always remember in this respect the comment made by a prominent American businessman some years ago. ‘When we are negotiating’, he said, ‘with Japanese colleagues either around a table or in a more relaxed manner over cocktails, we are in obvious disadvantage. They can always follow our low-voiced side remarks and interpret our exclamatory reactions, but we cannot’.

Yet the vocational / utilitarian dimension of foreign language learning is understandably more prominent in countries whose mother tongue is not widely spoken. Greece is among these countries. Employment priorities, coupled with a tradition of appreciation of Western European culture - the later seen as an extension of ancient Greek and Byzantine civilisations - and with a studious and enterprising spirit on the part of the Greek people have led Greek families to support foreign language learning long before the European Union or the Greek State have for that matter adopted similar policies. On their own initiative and resources a substantial number of families have prompted and supported foreign
language learning to an extend that a significant private sector have been developed. Hence, it is not an exaggeration to state that today the majority of Greek children, even in small urban areas, learn one foreign language - esp. English - and that many of them finally obtain a certificate- normally the Cambridge FCE or Proficiency Certificates - at a rather early age (from 12 to 16) something which is indicative of the fact that most of them start a foreign language during their years in primary school.

In this sense the implementation of policies introducing foreign language learning in the last three grades of the Greek primary school followed rather than instigated public demand and had from the very beginning a distinct utilitarian focus. All in all, the Greek State can rightfully declare today that it has already fulfilled the European Commission White Paper targets, as over 2,200 foreign language teachers teach in more than 3,300 fully-fledged primary schools for 3 hours per week, while an even greater number of courses are delivered on a private basis.

Yet, extensive demand for foreign languages, which led to the development of the afore-mentioned dual system of teaching, both through schools and the private sector, has in turn, created a number of problems. The most obvious is perhaps the wastage of financial resources and human effort. Convinced of the practical / utilitarian value of mastering at least one foreign language and wishing to attain this target by the age of 16, when the preparation for the highly competitive university examinations starts, a substantial number of parents urge their children to speed up their efforts by attending private courses parallel to but independent of those in the school. Public revenue and private income is thus wasted through repetition - the unavoidable implication, I must say, of market forces counteracting public policies to democratise educational provision.

But there are educational dimensions to this problem as well, which further aggravate the situation. Pupils in intensive private courses are naturally least interested in following school courses. To their mind the priority of acquiring the skills
necessary to pass external, i.e. the Cambridge or Goete or Institute Francaise, examinations and their prior knowledge of all linguistic elements taught in school make all other aspects of the school curriculum, be them cultural, aesthetic or instructional, irrelevant. The teacher on his part is thus left with the problem of coping with a mixed class in terms of levels of interest and knowledge to which individualized instruction or class diversification by level is not always an easy solution, especially in the primary school where the prevailing pattern of one teacher for one class does not allow for major organizational rearrangements and where the teacher himself has only a very limited, if any, pedagogical training.

I believe, however, that all this undue emphasis on the part of the educational clientele and planners on the utilitarian aspect of mastering one or more foreign languages with all its fiscal, social and educational implications are, to a large extent, owed to a misinterpretation or at least to a unilateral perception of the concept of the ‘global village’ per se. It emanates from its very character which constitutes a contradiction in terms. The village and the globe describe each a different set of relations with distinctly different characteristics. Proximity, intimacy, familiarity, direct face to face contact, common initiation to adult life, reliance on communal solidarity and collaboration, common codes of communication based equally on verbal as well as on symbolic signs are some of the basic features of life in the village. The globe on the other hand is characterized by distance, unfamiliarity, indirect and impersonal contact, diversity of social initiation processes and communication codes, as well as competition, sometimes even by extensive and acute rivalry and contention.

Thus, living in the global village implies something more complicated and demanding than simply acquiring the linguistic minima of communication that could allegedly facilitate employment or successful business ventures. After all, we all know that being capable to read a report, an article in a newspaper or an advertisement on a wall written in a foreign language does not necessarily mean that you have been able to fully understand their contextual meaning or to grasp all
their delicate yet very important connotations. In the same sense that you don’t easily appreciate the hints in a remark or the fun in a joke during an oral discourse or that you don’t always succeed in making yourself clearly understood through written communication even though you have a technically sound knowledge of the foreign language. To be competitive in the international labour market and to be able to benefit from opportunity in the new world-wide economic arena, you certainly need to have achieved something more than mere linguistic skills.

The conventional wisdom of my academic discipline - and I am a comparativist as you probably know - has long been suggesting that besides the language of oral or written communication in a society or in a nation, there lies, indistinguishable at first sight and from a long distance, another language. The ‘language of life’ or the ‘national idiom’, as it is usually called, which embodies and epitomizes all those important details of common social initiation within the proximity and intimacy of specific social and/or national context, that an outsider should know before being able to really understand the processes and functions in a village and to communicate successfully with its inhabitants.

Consequently foreign language teaching could and perhaps should contribute to this end. Together with instruction of the mother tongue it should also aim at uncovering all these delicate connotations of everyday life that are codified in the language of a people and that despite their external, idiosyncratic or cultural differences, are all disclosing the presence of an international web of common meanings, sentiments and moral speculations. To site only the obvious, the basic human needs for safety, love, belonging, self-esteem and actualization, the metaphysical awe of our existence, the search for freedom, the comforting feeling of getting to the truth are some of the constituent parts of this web. And it is the appreciation of its existence through language teaching that may compound the antithetical conceptual elements of the village and the globe, thus simultane-
ously providing better prospects to economic and social life in the global village and a more versatile role to language teaching.

As far as the latter aim is concerned I am not suggesting that we should go back to older forms of language teaching. I am not suggesting that contemporary pupils should follow the long aged now fictitious hero of my French textbook, Mr Vincin, in his trips to the main cultural sites of Paris, or that they should undertake journeys like those described in my English textbook through the main American States and their wonders. I am fully aware that such a suggestion would be simply reminiscent, of my childhood and would overlook criticisms for dissembled cultural imperialism and in any case I would never have attempted to make it in front of an audience of language experts.

What I am very modestly trying to say here is that language teaching should not merely aim at acquiring linguistic skills for communication and employment in a unified world. After all, even in the unlikely case that every European would acquire mastering of 3 languages there would always be a verbal communication void on many occasions both within Europe and, of course, in the world. It should not also aim singularly at developing the human mind both in the psychological and the cultural sense of the world. In addition to these very noble and very important aims, language teaching could and should also contribute decisively to disclosing the really common language in the global village.

This task, if we decide to undertake it, is certainly difficult to carry out. It will make us perhaps reconsider our priorities, rearrange our syllabi, change our didactic approaches, rewrite our books, re-examine our assumptions about what a young child at the primary school age can learn and how, and change the vocational training of our teachers respectively. Yet things may not be so difficult as they look at first sight. We should not forget that young children today have already developed a feeling of living in the global village. Through television, the Internet and generally the mass communication media of all sorts they already share
similar aesthetic preferences in food, music, the way they dress, have their hair-
cut and so on. Due to demographic movements on the other hand modern socie-
ties are pluralistic. The miniature of the global village is the city or the town itself,
so that the primary school pupil has in front of him the concrete prototype and
need not resort to formal operations and hypothetico-deductive reasoning.

In the Greek case especially, the approach I am suggesting may also contribute
substantially to the solution of the problems created by the interference of the
private sector in the state school’s function, by providing a distinct and educa-
tionally worthwhile role to the latter. In the case of bigger nations it may provide
the additional argument required to convince young people that if they wish to be
more understanding and vocationally successful in the global village, the learning
of a less spoken language would perhaps prove to be equally useful. In any case
life in the global village deserves nothing less than being worth living for all.