

## **Student teachers' viewpoints and attitudes towards issues of European Language Policy**

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### **Abstract**

Η παρούσα έρευνα αποσκοπεί στην αποτύπωση και καταγραφή των απόψεων των μελλοντικών εκπαιδευτικών για συγκεκριμένα θέματα της ευρωπαϊκής εκπαιδευτικής πολιτικής, καθώς και των στάσεών τους απέναντι στην πολυγλωσσία και την πολυπολιτισμικότητα. Στην έρευνα, η οποία πραγματοποιήθηκε κατά το ακαδημαϊκό έτος 2007-2008, συμμετείχαν 495 φοιτητές του 4<sup>ου</sup> έτους, προερχόμενοι από πέντε Ελληνικά Πανεπιστήμια. Το ερωτηματολόγιο χρησιμοποιήθηκε ως το βασικό εργαλείο συλλογής δεδομένων, τα οποία δεδομένα αναλύθηκαν με τη χρήση περιγραφικής στατιστικής. Επίσης εφαρμόστηκαν οι τεχνικές του t-test και της ANOVA. Επιπρόσθετα ημιδομημένες συνεντεύξεις έγιναν με συγκεκριμένο αριθμό φοιτητών για να ληφθούν πιο εκτεταμένα ποιοτικά δεδομένα. Η έρευνα προσέφερε ένα σημαντικό corpus δεδομένων που σκιαγραφούν α) τις θετικές στάσεις των Ελλήνων μελλοντικών εκπαιδευτικών για βασικά θέματα γλωσσικών εκπαιδευτικών πολιτικών, β) το ιδιαίτερο ενδιαφέρον τους για την εκμάθηση ξένων γλωσσών για επικοινωνιακούς σκοπούς και γ) την επιθυμία τους να συμμετάσχουν στα προγράμματα ανταλλαγής των φοιτητών. Επιπλέον τα δεδομένα μας επιτρέπουν να διαμορφώσουμε την υπόθεση για την αποδοχή σε μεγάλο βαθμό της κινητικότητας των φοιτητών και προβάλλουν την επικοινωνία και την αμοιβαία κατανόηση, που υφίσταται ανάμεσα στους ευρωπαίους πολίτες, ως συνεργασία για την ανάπτυξη μιας ευρωπαϊκής διάστασης στην εκπαίδευση.

### **Λέξεις-κλειδιά**

Πολυγλωσσία, ευρωπαϊκή γλωσσική πολιτική, κινητικότητα, στάσεις, μελλοντικοί εκπαιδευτικοί.

## 1. Introduction

Since the European Union has been created as a multilingual and multicultural society, “Europe has to find its balance between preservation and promotion of cultural identity and the development of a common communicative sphere” (Béacco and Byram 2003). In such a context, linguistic diversity entails the State Member citizens to be competent in a certain number of languages, to be sensitive to the cultural diversity in Europe and to be able to appreciate its wealth.

Among the main objectives of the Council of Europe is the promotion and enhancement of cultural identity and linguistic diversity in Europe; it is proclaimed that “only a better knowledge of European languages can facilitate communication and interaction among Europeans of different mother tongues in order to promote mobility, co-operation and mutual understanding and to overcome discrimination” (Boldizsár 2003).

This position of the Council of Europe is officially set out in the following documents whose purpose is to encourage the learning of languages at an early age, to motivate European citizens to learn two languages other than the mother tongue throughout their lives and to promote the teaching of the less widely used and less taught languages. The ‘Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers on modern languages’ (1998) and the ‘Recommendation on the European Year of Languages’ (2001) emphasised the spread of language learning and the improvement of language teaching in the European Union. In addition, the European Year of Lifelong Learning (1996) emphasised the fact that language learning does not end after school and the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2001) focused on improving and diversifying language learning and teaching within the education and provided a good basis for schemes to describe the language skills of individuals in an objective, practical and transparent manner. Furthermore, documents such as the White Paper (1995) stated that certain key skills – including language skills – would be necessary for all citizens to be able to play a full part in the society of the future; it proposed the objective that all citizens should be able to speak two European Union languages in addition to their mother tongue (Commission of Europe 2001). The Green Paper (1996) concluded that “learning at least two Community languages has become a precondition if citizens of the European Union are to benefit from occupational and personal opportunities open to them in the single market”.

Promoting linguistic diversity means actively encouraging the teaching and learning of the widest possible range of languages in primary and secondary education, in universities and adult education centres. For this purpose, the Commission has undertaken various actions to encourage national, regional and local authorities to work for promoting language learning; actions dealing with primary and secondary education (Comenius), actions dealing with vocational training in various professional sectors (Leonardo da Vinci programmes), actions on adult education and training (Grundtung) and on Higher Education (Erasmus). Particularly, Universities could play a ‘key-role’ in promoting multilingualism as well as in encouraging students to participate in mobility programmes. For this reason, a significant part of the Socrates budget is devoted to enabling students to follow a course of study at a university in another participating country (Commission of Europe 2003).

## 2. The Study

The present study is an attempt to deal with issues that fall under the European Language Policy. More precisely, it aimed at identifying and recording student teachers' beliefs, viewpoints and attitudes towards certain issues of European Language Policy and mobility programmes. This was to be achieved through the development of a research project that took place during the spring semester of the academic year 2007-2008. The basic objectives of the research were the following:

- 1) to identify the extent to which Greek student teachers are informed and the degree of their agreement with central issues on European Language Policy;
- 2) to explore how they conceive multilingualism and multiculturalism;
- 3) to record their views on the role of English language as a 'lingua franca' and the need of communicating in other European languages across Europe;
- 4) to elicit their preferences and their motives in relation to participating in mobility programmes;
- 5) to identify their needs and viewpoints on learning languages for academic purposes in the Universities.

### 2.1 Participants

470 fourth year students of the Departments of Primary Education from Greek Universities (140 from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 130 from the University of Western Macedonia, 100 from the University of Thessaly, 100 from the Democretion University of Thrace) participated in the study. 375 were females and 95 were males; 86,3% of the total number of the participants aged from 20 to 22, 9,6% of them aged from 23 to 29, and 4,1% of the students were over 30 years.

The great majority of the students (87.6%) declared they can speak English as a foreign language, a few of them (4,7%) can speak French as a first foreign language, 3,8 % and 1% of the total number of the participants can speak German and Italian as a first foreign language respectively. Their English language level ranged from high (22%) to average (47%) and low (31%). Moreover, 250 of the 470 participants declared that they master some basic skills in another European language besides English.

### 2.2 Research instruments

For conducting the present research, a *questionnaire* and *semi structured interviews* were used as the basic instruments. The statements included in the questionnaire were designed in closed form so that to obtain specific responses from the highest number of respondents. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 students in order for the researchers to gain more extended qualitative data.

Data derived from the *questionnaires* was analyzed by using descriptive statistical methods. Frequencies and percentages for all items of the questionnaires were obtained. Moreover, the techniques of Chi-square-test ( $X^2$ ), t-test and factor analysis were performed in order to identify differences in ranking the various items concerning students' viewpoints on language policies and language learning.

The *interview* data underwent first and second level coding as well as pattern coding, which involves giving descriptive or conceptual names. Codes resulted in groups of categories, was 'labelled' by a specific name; the categories with common characteristics were clustered into basic themes (Miles and Humberman 1994).

### 3. Interview results

The verbal data, after being coded, resulted in fifty six (56) codes, which were grouped into fourteen (14) categories classified into four basic themes: a) conceptualisation of multilingualism, b) status of European languages, c) European citizens' communication competence and d) student mobility.

#### 3.1 Conceptualisation of multilingualism

'Multilingualism' is perceived as a) a person's ability to communicate across linguistic and cultural boundaries (plurilingualism) and b) the co-existence of different language communities in European Union. The majority of the participants claimed that linguistic diversity of the European Union should be preserved and they believed that the ability to understand and communicate in more than one language encourages people to become more open and sensitive to other cultures in the European context. The acquisition of a 'plurilingual' repertoire throughout life is thus associated with development of an awareness of the cultural complexity of the environment, as well as maintenance and promotion of diversity, and awareness of European identity (table 1).

Table – 1. Categories and codes of 'Conceptualisation of multilingualism'

<i>THEMES/CATEGORIES</i>	<i>CODES/CODING PATTERN</i>	<i>OCCURRENCES</i>
1. profile	Male/Female Language level----- 4th grade student Holder of another Bach. Degree.....	
A. CONCEPTUALIZATION OF MULTILINGUALISM		
2. Multilingualism related to multicultural context	- KEDICUL=the key to discover other cultures in the European context	18
	-COCULINE=communicate in different cultural and linguistic environment	13
	MAIPRDIV=Maintenance and promotion of diversity	14
	-AWEURID=awareness of European identity	5
	- COEXIOKN=necessary 'condition' for exchanging ideas, opinions, knowledge	18
	-LIDIVPR=linguistic diversity of the European Union should be preserved.	17
	-MAINALA=parallel maintenance of national languages	16

*3.2 Status of the European languages*

Concerning the status of the European languages, all the participants declared that equity is far from being a reality, since they believed that linguistic diversity is protected only in the Commission's documents. On the contrary there is supremacy of 'strong'- 'dominant' languages like German, French, Italian, and Spanish, since there is an interrelation between the economical and political status of a country and the language dominance. Nevertheless, they recognized the usefulness of 'strong' languages for communicative and working purposes and suggested that users of other European languages should be capable of communicating in the dominant languages.

It is worth mentioning that all interviewees exerted the 'leading' role of English in Europe as a 'lingua franca' and pointed out the necessity for every European citizen to learn English, since it is a 'key factor' for basic transactions and mutual understanding as well as for mobility and work purposes. Many parents and students, but also many business companies, media, and even institutions perceive English as being a necessary and sufficient foreign language; as a result the motivation to acquire a second foreign language is reduced.

They stressed the necessity for respect to linguistic diversity from the part of European citizens who must be educated in the spirit of tolerance and appreciation of other cultures and languages in order to combat prejudice and xenophobia. The linguistic heritage and cultural diversity should be protected and developed through acquiring sensitivity to diversity and using the official languages of all State members. Thus, they pointed out the necessity of appreciating other cultures through direct contact with people and the importance of catering for lesser-used languages.

In addition, the participants revealed the immediate need for promoting Greek Language as a foreign language since Greek is spoken by a small minority as a Foreign Language in the European context. There is a high degree of consensus in students' perception that promotion could be achieved through encouraging the teaching and learning Greek in European and Balkan universities and through expanding the participation into mobility programmes (table 2).

Table 2. Categories and codes of 'Status of European languages'

<i>THEMES/CATEGORIES</i>	<i>CODES/CODING PATTERN</i>	<i>OCCURENCES</i>
B. STATUS OF LANGUAGES		
3. equal status of European languages	-EQLANTRE=equity of languages is far from being a reality	17
	LIDIPRDO=linguistic diversity is protected in documents	18
	RELIDIEC=Respect to linguistic diversity from the part of European citizen	19
4. supremacy of strong languages	-INLANEC=Interrelation between economical status of a country and language dominance	15

	- DOMGFII=dominance of German, French, Italian, Spanish	20
	USEDOLA= Usefulness of dominant-strong languages	19
5. languages in Curriculum	- INENDOLA=inexistence of non-dominant languages	3
6. The status of English language	-ENLINFRA=English as a lingua franca	20
	-NELEAENG=necessity for every European citizen to learn english	20
	-KFTRAMUN='key factor' for basic transactions and mutual understanding	18
	DOENEVLI=dominance of English in everyday life	14
	-KFMOWOP='key factor' for mobility for work purposes	12
7. Promotion of the Greek language	-URPRGRFL=Urgency of promoting GL as a foreign language	18
	-FAGRORW=Familiarisation with Greek origine words	3
	-TLGLFLUN=encouraging teaching and learning GL in foreign universities	16
	- PRENGRCI=promotion and enhancement of Greek cultural identity	8
	- Greek is spoken by a small minority as a FL	10
	-Promotion of Gl in Balkan Universities	4
8. Suggestions about multilingualism	-CALEUSLA= cater for lesser-used languages	12
	- APOTHCUL=appreciation of other cultures through direct contact with people	17
	- LEGOFLA=legitimacy of use of all official languages	15
	- PRCUIDLD=promotion of cultural identity and language diversity in Europe	19
	ACQSEDI= acquiring sensitivity to diversity	17

*3.3 European citizens' communication competence*

For the great majority of the interviewees, the acquisition of 'plurilingual' ability results into encouraging the teaching and learning of the widest possible range of languages in primary and secondary education, in universities, in adult education centres and enterprises. They believed that the ability to understand and communicate in more than one language – already a daily reality for the majority of people across the globe - is a desirable life-skill for all European citizens. This is because 'communication ability' and 'plurilingual comprehension' are instrumental in openness to other people's languages and cultures and in combating prejudice and xenophobia. Knowing more languages opens doors to other cultures, and improves intercultural understanding both within Europe and with the rest of the world. In addition, European citizens who speak more languages can reap the full benefits of free movement in the European Union and can integrate more easily in another country for study or work.

For this purpose, they agreed on the fact that all citizens should be able to communicate in the mother tongue plus at least two other European languages and they claimed that language learning from an early age is important, since it could contribute to young children's sensitivity and openness to linguistic and cultural diversity. They claimed that younger beginners can learn easily and quickly in a game-based context and tend to attain better long-term outcomes. In addition, learning a foreign language at this age could contribute to young learners' whole school performance. Only one participant disagreed on early introduction of a FL, as she considered that it could cause some impediments in L1 acquisition, and she believed that there is not a clear start point for learning languages.

Besides, they believed that life-long language learning begins at the earliest age and continues throughout schooling and professional life. Encouraging European citizens to achieve a communicative ability in a number of languages and to update language ability according to the current conditions is a current necessity. Language learning is for all citizens in adult education centres and enterprises and state institutions throughout their lives (table 3).

Table 3. Categories and codes of 'European citizens' communication competence'

<i>C. EUROPEAN CITIZEN COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE</i>		<i>OCCURRENCES</i>
9. necessity for learning languages	COMTWLGS=communicate in at least two other languages	20
	NELEDOLA=necessity of learning dominant languages	18
	NELESDOL=necessity of learning less dominant languages	11
10. advantages	--IMULTCOM= multilingual comprehension	18

	- OPLANCU=openness to other people's languages and cultures COPRXEN=combat prejudice and xenophobia	12
11. Early language learning	INREALLE=Introduction of early language learning in primary and in pre-primary education	18
	- YLEARQU=young children can learn easily and quickly	15
	--YCSELCDI=young children's sensitivity and openness to language and cultural diversity	15
	PSATLFL= children's positive attitudes towards learning FLs	17
	- LFLCLPE=learning aFL at this age could contribute to whole school performance	8
	GAMFLEA=game-based FL Learning	8
	EALEAFL= early for very young children to learn a FL	2
	NCLSRLL=not a clear start point for learning languages	2
12.Lifelong learning	-LALELAG=language learning at all ages	20
	UPDLABCO=necessity for updating language ability according to the conditions	18
	-LLTHPRI=importance of learning languages throughout professional and personal life	17
	- LLADEDCE=encouraging LL in adult education centres and enterprises and state institutions	8

### 3.4 Student mobility

Through students' responses, there is an obvious positive attitude towards the European mobility programmes. Although almost all students acknowledged their usefulness and highlighted the necessity for participating in mobility programmes; however, a significant part of the sample mentioned the lack of information on mobility programmes from the part of the Universities.

With reference to the advantages of participation in mobility programmes, 'improvement of language competence', 'exchanging of beliefs, attitudes and viewpoints' and 'exchanging teaching and research methods' appeared to be the most

popular incentives for students to attend the programme. In addition, participation in such programmes could contribute to improving students' intercultural understanding and providing a key for them to discover other cultures and to convey the values of their own culture. Half of the interviewees welcomed the idea of participating in programmes, because they would like to know and become familiar with the educational systems of other European countries (table 4).

Table 4. Categories and codes of 'student mobility'

<i>D. STUDENT MOBILITY</i>		<i>OCCURRENCES</i>
Participating in mobility programmes	-SIGNPAR=Significance of participation	18
Advantages of participation	-EXBEATV=Exchanging of beliefs, attitudes and viewpoints	12
	- EXTEARE=Exchanging teaching and research	10
	-DEVLACO=Development of Language competence	19
	-CONVACU=convey the values of their own culture	14
	-IMINTCUN=improve intercultural understanding	8
	- FAEDSYS=familiarisation with educational system of other countries	8
	-TRANKNO=transmission of knowledge	7

**4. Questionnaire results**

*4.1 Participation in mobility programmes*

With reference to the total number of students (470), who responded the questionnaires, the great majority (452) agreed on the need to participate in mobility programmes. There were significant differences between the more competent and the less competent English language learners ( $F_{2,449} = 3.878, p < 0.05$ ). The more proficient language learners showed greater preference to participating in mobility programmes (m.3,1) than the average and low ability language learners (m.2,9 and m.2,7).

On the other hand, students mentioned some factors that deter them from participating in mobility programmes. It is worth noting that the highest percentage (43,4%) was given to 'inadequate information' provided by the Universities. 'Lack of correspondence of the study syllabus to the study syllabus of the host university' was their second reason (38,9%); meanwhile, 'students' insufficient language level' gained the lowest percentage (25,3%) as an obstacle for prohibiting them from participation.

Student teachers were asked to rank the areas in which they would like to get prepared for participating in mobility programmes from a list of five: (1= most important, 5= least important). It is worth mentioning that 'language training' was rated as first

priority by the majority of the participants (50,5%). In addition, the students were very sensitive to get information on 'study issues and the syllabus of the host University', since 41,3% of the total sample ranked it as first priority. However they seemed to rank low 'information on the culture of the host country' as first priority (8,6%), and they showed little interest in receiving information on 'every day life of the host country' (4,7%).

Female students (m3,1) ranked their desire to get 'information on the culture of the mobility country' significantly high ( $t = 1.994$ ,  $df = 389$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) compared to male students (m2,8). On the other hand male students (m2,1) ranked their desire to get information on 'study issues and the syllabus of host University' highly compared to females (m1,8) ( $t = 1.994$ ,  $df = 389$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

#### 4.2 Learning modern languages in Universities

Since 'language training' and 'plurilingual ability' were considered to be students' first priority for their preparation for participating in programmes, higher education institutions were believed to play a more active role in promoting multilingualism amongst students. More specifically, they were strongly positive (47.4%) and just positive to learning FL in universities (46.2%) and only 6.4% of the total number of students showed a negative attitude.

However more interest was showed in learning foreign languages in an academic context from the part of more proficient learners compared to less competent ones ( $\chi^2 = 12.115$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) ( $\chi^2 = 12.115$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). It is worth mentioning that the majority of the students (89,7%) preferred learning and improving English language. German (36,4%) was the second most favoured foreign language for students to learn, followed by French (2,6%). Italian (16,8%) and Spanish (14,8%) received lower percentages from students. They justified this preference by stating some incentives for learning English. The most popular incentive for learning English appeared to be their 'occupational rehabilitation', which was ranked higher by 33.4% of the participants. In addition, they viewed the 'postgraduate studies in European countries' as meriting an important level of priority for learning foreign languages (28.4%). 'Access to foreign bibliography' received a sufficient percentage (18.3%) as a basic reason for learning a FL. However, the majority of the sample showed little interest in using English for 'mobility and staying abroad purposes' (13.2%) and for "getting familiarized with other European cultures" (11.8%).

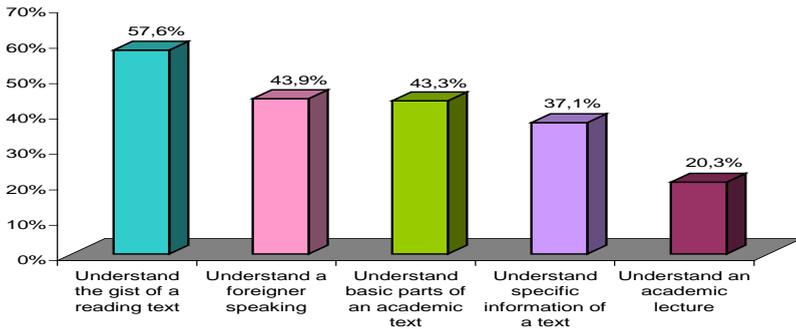
#### 4.3 Language skills development

According to the participants' views, foreign language courses offered in Universities should be focused on improving both receptive ( $m = 3.17$ ,  $sd = 0.5$ ) and productive skills of the students ( $m = 2.81$ ,  $sd = 0.58$ ).

Concerning the *receptive skills*, a great part of students (57,6%) viewed 'understanding the gist of a reading text' as meriting an important level of training priority. In addition, a significant number of students showed interest in getting trained in 'understanding a foreigner speaking' (43,9%) and 'understanding basic parts of an academic text' (43,3%). However, the participants showed less preference to 'Understanding specific information of a text' (37,1%) and 'understanding an academic lecture' (20,3%) respectively (Figure 1). It is noteworthy that the higher language level students ranked the necessity and the importance of developing oral and written

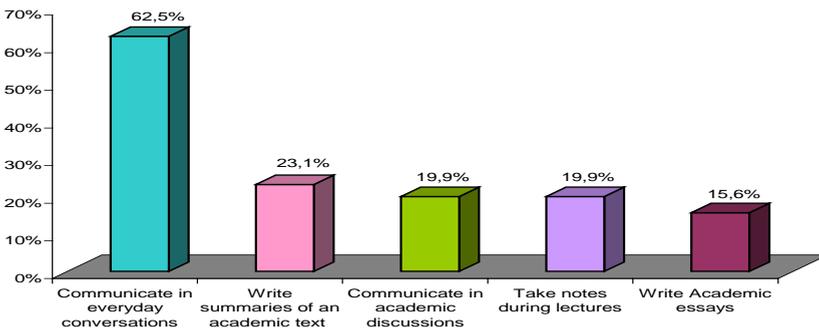
language production higher ( $m = 3.33$ ,  $sd = 0.46$ ) compared to medium level students ( $m = 3.16$ ,  $sd = 0.45$ ) ( $m = 3.16$ ,  $sd = 0.45$ ) and to the lower level ones ( $m = 3.08$ ,  $sd = 0.55$ ).

**Figure 1** *Receptive skills*



Furthermore, ‘*productive skills*’ was considered as an important area to be developed. Specifically, the majority of the students (62,5%) needed some practice into ‘communicating in everyday conversations’. ‘Writing summaries of an academic text’ was preferred by a significant proportion of the sample (23,1%), as well as ‘taking notes during lectures’ and ‘communicating in academic environment’ were scored highly by a number of students respectively (19,9%). However, 15,6% of the participants expressed less need in being trained on ‘writing academic essays’ (15,6%) (Figure 2).

**Figure 2** *Productive Skills*



However, there was a significant difference between more and less competent language learners, since the proficient learners showed more preference to the ‘productive sub-skills’ ( $m = 2.93$ ,  $sd = 0.58$ ) than the less proficient ones ( $m = 2.76$ ,  $sd = 0.55$ ). In addition, the *productive skills* were considered to merit an important level of training priority by the students aged above 30 years ( $m = 3.26$ ,  $sd = 0.61$ ) compared to students ranged from 23-29 years ( $m = 2.93$ ,  $sd = 0.62$ ) and to students ranged from 20-22 years ( $m = 2.77$ ,  $sd = 0.56$ ).

## **5. Discussion- Concluding remarks**

The study highlighted the Greek students' positive attitudes towards basic issues of language policies and their great interest in learning foreign languages for communicative purposes, and participating in student exchange projects. Furthermore, the findings allowed for suggestions for ensuring high quality in student mobility, as well as cooperation among universities for developing a European dimension to the education.

The student teachers believed that 'plurilingualism' is essential for the proper functioning of the European Union and the acquisition and learning of multicultural knowledge by supporting early language learning. Figel (2005) highlighted children's cognitive, linguistic and cultural benefits from learning more than one language and stated that in an enlarged and multilingual Europe, learning foreign languages from a very young age allows us to discover other cultures and better prepare for occupational mobility (in Edelenbos et al 2006). Studies (Blondin et al. 1998, Edelenbos and de Jong 2004) have confirmed this viewpoint and indicated that a) children's enjoyment, their openness towards other languages are 'key factors' for the potential benefits of early language learning, b) this early dual language exposure does not delay development in either language (Edelenbos et al 2006).

Linguistic abilities appear as a basic factor in mutual understanding and communication; thus, European citizens should be motivated either to master or update basic skills in two foreign languages throughout their lives. In addition, multilingual competence and sufficient communicative skills in European languages are essential to every graduate's employability. However, most of the prospective teachers had a marked preference for learning or improving 'strong' languages, such as German, French, Italian and Spanish and exerted the leading role of English language. In such a way, they confirmed the rule of language 'classification' into 'strong', and 'weak' ones.

Universities could be instrumental in informing, encouraging and motivating students to participate in mobility programmes, since information about issues concerning European educational cooperation is insufficient. The interest of Greek students for the European mobility programmes is to be expected. Greece remains, at least up to now, a country which primarily 'exports' Erasmus -and not only- students (O.E.C.D. 2004: 93). Therefore, the policy adapted for attracting foreign students does not work effectively (ibid: 116). Foreign Erasmus students mentioned difficulties when they studied in Greece and other Mediterranean countries. In these countries the Erasmus students have to cope mainly with organisational problems, like the absence of advisors in the universities of the above countries (Teichler 2001: 201-202, cited in Iliadou et al. 2008). In such cases, Greek universities could have a responsibility to promote the Greek language by enabling incoming students to learn it to a high standard.

Universities could also be instrumental in promoting individual multilingualism by providing facilities for language learning. They could play a key role in providing students with opportunities to develop skills in a wider range of European languages. Thus, they should implement a coherent language policy offering opportunities to students for improving their language skills, in a range of languages much wider than languages taught in primary and secondary education; in this way, there could be a multiplicity of citizens acquiring even basic skills in a variety of languages.

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