

**CASE STUDY:**

***Creating Opportunities for the Cognitive and Emotional Engagement of EFL Teachers through a Journal***

Marianthi Kotadaki, Greece

**I. THE BACKGROUND**

As a compulsory subject, English language learning in Greek state schools forms an integral part of both primary and secondary school curricula. The stated aims in the official documentation for either sector emphasise the teachers’ good grounding on contemporary trends to FL teaching and learning, their consistent updating their subject knowledge and skills and their manipulation of any provided opportunities for continuing self-development and quality assurance in their individual target situations.

Nevertheless, the inadequate and occasionally deficient pre-service training teachers officially receive, as well as the absence of systematically created prospects for ongoing self improvement, gradually get to impinge negatively on their daily performance. Unawareness of developments in the field of language learning worldwide prevents the uprooting of traditional teaching attitudes and practices, while at the same time short-circuits experimentation with novel didactic approaches. With no officially provided guidance for self-evaluation and improvement, and meagre encouragement to embed current approaches to teaching and learning either due to the state school policy, the school structures, or their own training inadequacy, EFL teachers in Greece commonly follow a solitary route in their careers.

On the other hand, year on year, more and more language teachers possessing higher qualifications are placed in state schools, yet, without their abilities being valued in some way by the state. These teachers can only invest their expertise and skills locally, promoting the quality of their work in the general or technical school environment of the city, town, island or village they are summoned to serve in.

Taking into account the specific occupational setting conditions, the establishment of a warm and inspiring ambiance, which could foster the constructive exchange of every teacher’s cognitive and experiential resources as well as the collaborative effort for quality assurance, could by large be achieved by the local School Advisor’s far-sighted initiative taking. The only prerequisite to this goal is his/her ability to gain the teachers’ trust, and also to stimulate and maintain their commitment for quality improvement in their working environments.

**II. THE CASE STUDY**

The present case study discusses an initiative taken by the author, Mrs Marianthi Kotadaki, who works as a School Advisor for EFL teachers in the state schools of three prefectures in Western Greece (the prefecture of Ileia, Peloponnese and the Ionian islands of Cefalonia and Zakynthos). It involves the creation of a discipline-specific journal whose content consists of teaching-related theoretical articles, as well practical methodological issues (teaching tips, lesson plans, reference book and website reviews, etc.) and general cultural topics, all drawn from both specialists’ as well as the serving teachers’ expertise and experience. The journal comes out twice a year (Autumn-Winter, Spring-Summer), covering the period of two seasons each time. The principal aims set by the specific initiative are the following:

1. To motivate in-service teachers – especially the higher qualified or trained ones- to disseminate didactic and pedagogic knowledge, experience and materials to their colleagues, so that there might be brisk interest and multifold activity for the improvement of their own teaching methods

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2. To encourage the exchange of good practices and stimulate self and peer development
3. To enable the language teachers to update and expand their knowledge of the subject and review their personal teaching attitudes
4. To foster constructive communication and collaboration among colleagues
5. To reinforce the teachers’ writing skills
6. To promote reflective teaching
7. To draw other specialists’ attention to the concerns of language teachers
8. To enhance the quality of language teaching and learning in the state schools of the specific prefectures

Overall, the journal aims at inflicting a blow on such traditional and deeply rooted trends as the provision of training to language –and not only- teachers once and for all at the threshold of their career and the absence of any further chances for their prospective development ever after. Secondly, the journal wishes to reverse the existing view that, in spite of being vital parts of the same organisation, teachers in Greek schools should act as single individual units, performing parallel to one another. On the contrary, they had better become aware of their common bonds and the benefits of collaboration and shared ideas in their particular situations.

### **III. THE PROCESS OF IMPLEMENTATION**

Procedurally, the creation of the journal was preceded by a tactful investigation of the teachers’ knowledge, interests, needs and predispositions towards the construction of such a journal. For this reason, statistical data were gathered via a questionnaire distributed to all in-service teachers of the regions under focus. Questions sought information about the extent of qualified teaching expertise teachers possessed, the degree and relevance of the training they had received, their needs in terms of self-improvement and overall quality assurance in their target situation, their personal interests, as well as their attitude towards such an initiative. At the same time a journal editing board was formed including a limited number of qualified teachers who willingly and consistently offered to respond to the requirements of this task.

After a high percentage of positive and encouraging data by the teachers were received, an appeal for content materials collection within a specific time limit was made. Contributions were collected, evaluated, selected and edited. Given the fact that the Greek state can hardly provide financial support to individual initiatives, no matter how positive their washback effect on national educational policies might be, sponsors had to be sought. Two international publishing houses, providing schools with teaching and learning resources, accepted to sponsor the publication of the first issue. The latter came out and was submitted for approval to the relevant Ministry Committee, according to the national law. After licence by the Ministry was granted, the issue was promptly distributed to the teachers of the areas in scope and further feedback was gathered on the relevance, utility, and practicality of the contents to the target audience, as well as the degree of the achievement of the initially posed aims.

### **IV. MAJOR OUTCOMES**

Three issues have already been published since the conception of the idea in 2005: *Issue 1* (Spring-Summer 2005), *Issue 2* (Autumn 2005-Winter 2006) and *Issue 3* (Spring-Summer 2006). The first issue reached the three main prefectures of Western Greece, but the rest issues were also sent to the two Ionian Islands which were further added to the School Advisor’s jurisdiction. Evidence of the impact of the journal on both the individual and group output and in relation to prospects for continuing improvement was a) reported through qualitative data yielding instruments and b) collected through relevant teacher initiatives. Some of the major outcomes of the journal edition follow below:

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- i. A subsequent questionnaire, interviews with individual teachers and brisk complimentary written correspondence revealed their acknowledgement of the fact that, the journal materials not only shed light to crucial issues related to the implementation of *teaching* but also strengthened their hope that the quality of publicly provided language education can be enhanced in this manner.
- ii. The number, variety and quality of contributions sent for the next issues indicated the teachers' growing motivation to create, take initiatives and risks, involve in further training activities and entrust these to their colleagues. It also revealed many of the teachers' talent for academic writing while also disclosing a considerable number of competent and appropriately trained language practitioners.
- iii. Particular interest was exhibited towards published reports of teacher participation in European programme acts evident in almost all issues, which led to a reported increase of school and individual teacher candidacies for similar actions (e.g. organising e-pals projects, engaging their schools in e-twinning programmes, using foreign teaching assistants in class and so on).
- iv. Classroom observation indicated that many of the older staff began to sample more contemporary teaching practices (communicative teaching of skills, project work, computer-mediated teaching) as a result of journal reading.
- v. Classroom observation also indicated that younger teachers are deeply concerned with the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning procedures within their individual situations and willing to take initiatives to upgrade teaching and learning processes.
- vi. Plenty of the journal contents were presented and discussed during locally organised seminars, where the teachers had the opportunity to experience further analysis and demonstration of many of the teaching proposals published. On the same occasions, teachers exchanged views on vital work-related issues, compared and contrasted practices and attitudes and established a rich learning environment with a beneficial impact on their future output.
- vii. The exchange of knowledge and expertise stimulated the development of brisk communication among teachers a number of whom attempted to further cooperate towards common goals.

Since the edition of the first issue, teachers have frequently admitted growing an emotional capacity to learn more and developing a self-reflective attitude towards their own teaching habits in relation to new approaches in the field. Above all, the creation of the journal highlighted the distinct quality of each teacher, enhanced their self-confidence, demonstrated their responsibility for the progress of their working environments and stressed the need for committed, reflective, collaborative and continuously developing teaching.