## Full Length Research Article

# DESIGNING A TRAINING PROGRAMME FOR FL TEACHERS IN THE FIELD OF THE LEARNING COMMUNITY APPROACH: A PROPOSED PROGRAMME FOR THE PRIMARY EDUCATION

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| ARTICLE INFO | ABSTRACT |
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| | The European Comission has included the "development/training of language teachers" in the action plan for the multilingualism promotion. The foreign language teachers have to adapt to the growing demands of the multicultural era and help all the students develop the language skills needed for their future. The way the students acquire the language has changed and will probably change in the following years, so it is more than necessary the teacher to go on a professional development. This paper outlines a proposed EFL teachers' training programme on the learning community approach which has been proved to serve beneficially to the students' language development (Papadopoulos and Griva, 2014; Papadopoulos *et al*. 2014). In this training programme, teachers will have the opportunity to enhance their knowledge in this innovative approach especially in this era where the students' active engagement and their motivation are very important factors in the language education. For the estimation of the feasibility of the project, there will be used a) the journal of the researcher, b) interviews with all the participant teachers and c) observation of a class practice from a coordinator. |

## INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that quality professional development can serve to the change of teachers' practices and positively affect students' learning (Borko, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2000). Hargreaves and Fullan (1995) have approached the professional development of teachers through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, self-awareness and adjustment to the social and education environment while Mpagakis (2003) supports that the basic education, the autonomy in teaching, the continuous learning and training and the social mission of the teacher are some of the central characteristic of the professional development of teachers.

### The importance of the foreign language teachers' training

The further development of the language teachers constitutes a benefit not only for the students and the school but for the teachers themselves as well. Studies have indicated that the basic teachers' education is not enough (Koutouzis, 1999) to equip teachers with the necessary qualities to respond to the students' needs, as a result, the continuous development of

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teachers is a key factor for their success in teaching. In fact, the knowledge is constantly revised that all teachers need to be updated in order to follow the changes since as Haskins (2002) supports the new and the "fresh" serves as helping to maintain interest in classroom teaching and

In the modern world, classes are filled with students with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, so the continuous professional development of language teachers becomes a priority (Smith *et al*., 2006). Specifically, all students are taught language in the same class regardless of physical, emotional or mental challenges (Saramma, 2006) while the situation becomes more complicated when we think about the number of students with different form of literacy. As it is reported by the National Clearinghouse for English language acquisition, in Europe the cultural and linguistic diversity that exists, has become a common situation in urban schools. Teachers find themselves unprepared to offer an instruction in such classes especially, when these student populations learn English as a foreign language plus their mother tongue and the Greek as a mother tongue. So, the development of the target language following the "learning community approach" requires the teachers to be fully trained and educated on it. So, teachers are required to be developed continually in order to be able to create classroom

environments in which there is harmonic interaction and collaboration and they support transformation processes (Richard and Rodgers, 2001). The continuous professional development is a useful way for language teacher to reflect on their work and achieve a self-assessment process that is missing in the school of the 21st century. Reflection is a process of inner conversation with self (Prawat, 1991) and the language teachers through the reflection develop awareness of practice (Mann, 2005). All the teachers need this awareness because of they create a dialogue between their knowledge and their experience (Bolton, 2002) and they can shape their understanding of their classroom practices (Griffiths and Tann, 1992) and further the needs of them. Through the continuous professional development of the language teachers, they can come in touch with new practices regarding their teaching domain, acquire a clear view of the fellow-teachers' practices and of course they are better able to monitor, make real-time decisions and respond to the changing needs of their students, reflecting on their own teachings (Yost *et al.*, 2000; McMeniman *et al.*, 2003).

In this age and era, classroom communities (teachers and students) are characterized by the need of change in the teaching and the learning process. Teachers are kindly requested to take in part in continuous professional development programs to become gain useful and new knowledge that serves beneficially to the students' needs and the teachers' better teachings. Innovation and change are essential parts of teachers' development (Bailey 1992; Willis and Willis 1996) especially in the language learning process. Through their development, they can experiment, explore and change the way the classroom works while to maintain the interest in the classroom (Allwright, 2005). A teacher's routinised tendency makes the plausibility difficult (McKenna, 2002) while the changes in the course design and materials are developmental (Wu 2002; Tomlinson 2003) and the teachers' sense of plausibility is developed through the touch of the teacher with other teaching practice and experiences that occur in a professional development programme (Prabhu, 2003).

## The importance of teachers' training on the learning community approach

The learning community approach is a very popular approach of students' language development. The term "learning community" has been already defined variously but the common characteristics of the supported definitions are the students sharing knowledge tendency, their contribution to the community, their different linguistic expertise and of course the members' interaction (Papadopoulos and Griva, 2014). In fact, a learning community is a group of students who work for the benefit of the community they are surrounded by and they establish a culture of learning with verbal and non verbal interaction through the different expertise of each member. Moreover, the demands of the current era made the EFL teachers' training necessary especially when we consider the fact that learning communities classrooms differ to a fair extend from most classrooms in several basic elements (Bielaczyc and Collins, 2009).

## The goals of the community

The ultimate goal in the learning communities is to create a culture of learning in which both the members individually and the community as a whole participate in a process of knowledge sharing and learning how to learn for raising and enhancing the collective knowledge and for achieving deeper understanding (Papadopoulos 2014; Papadopoulos *et al.* 2014). In the learning communities, special attention is paid to the diversity in members' expertise and their skills to problem solving situations. Key factor of it is the existence of differences and collaboration willingness.

## Learning activities

To achieve the above mentioned goal, the activities that will be used in a learning community programme should be considered carefully. Research (individual or group one), class discussions; cross age tutoring; working together for presentations are some of the activities that serve beneficially to the learning communities programs' implementations (Papadopoulos *et al.*, 2014). Although studies have indicated that such activities may help and support more traditional learning methods, these operate as a classroom system of activities that mutually affect and reinforce students with each other (Brown and Campione, 1996). In the LC approach, such activities provide students with the opportunity to sharing knowledge and skills, to making the learning process visible and articulated and of course to constructing the knowledge collaboratively.

## Teacher's roles and power relationships

The role of the teacher has changed over the years and it has become common to act as an organizer and facilitator of student-directed activities. Studies carried out, have shown that when the teacher becomes the facilitator and coordinator of students' work, creates opportunities for students' active participation in a relaxed and playful learning environment helps them overcome problems arising during group work and downgrades the antagonistic spirit (Papadopoulos *et al.* 2012, Griva and Semoglou, 2013, Papadopoulos 2014).

## Students' roles and power

In a learning community approach, there can be use central and peripheral roles among the members (Bielaczyc and Collins, 2009). However, these roles constantly change since within a learning community, many processes take place and different students' skills and contribution can be valued at a given time. The attention must be paid to the students' expertise development and to centering around the common goals. So, in the learning communities, there must be the sense of "who we are" among the members so there must be a notion of "community identity" developing collective awareness and common objectives.

## Resources

A key factor of a LC is the bringing of resources in the community. In the learning communities, students can use resources from the world outside the classroom while the important factor is that both the students themselves and the collective knowledge and skills of the community can become resources for the LC. Moreover, students are encouraged to find resource people who can be of help for the community's goal and they can help with the questions the students are

investigating, such as cross-age tutoring interactions, telementors discussion about issues, or to find information on the Web which is possibly transforming much of students' learning (Baird and Fisher., 2006; Consortium for School Networking, 2009; Ito, *et al*., 2010; Kist, 2010). Such experts from the community can bring important resources in the classroom and can contribute not only to the students' learning, but also to the teacher's professional development (Bielaczyc and Collins, 2009).

### Discourse

This element is very important for the students-members of a learning community and students are guided into topics discussions which is an effective way of expanding the knowledge in a learning community. The students are engaged in activities such as formulation of exercises, raising questions, commenting on texts in a multisensory context to use both the written and the oral discourse, taking into consideration multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1999). Multimodal material that is also used to arouse their interest, though digital presentations and relevant audiovisual material can create a framework where students enhance their interest and participation (Griva and Chostelidou 2012), practice the target language and acquire knowledge in a natural way (Short *et al*., 1996). Ideas and findings of the members are expressed in discussions and they can migrate throughout the community (Brown and Campione, 1996).

### Knowledge

In the learning community, the importance of the knowledge is crucial. In this approach, there is a circular growth of knowledge (Papadopoulos *et al.,* 2014). What the students have learnt leads them to see out further and then they share it with the community to help the growth of the collective knowledge. While in most classrooms there is the aim of covering all the topics of the curriculum and learning the same things by everyone, in learning communities, there is a common individual expertise and collective knowledge development.

### Products

In the past, Dewy spoke about the school opening to the society inside and outside. The members of the learning community tend to work together towards a product that can be used by the community (Bielaczyc and Collins, 2009). So, the members aim at working and developing their individual learning and expertise for the sake of the community's development and of course the further understanding and redesigning and reconstruction of this product for the next generations. Such "*tasks bring the research cycle to an end, force students to share knowledge across groups and act as occasions for exhibition and reflection*" (Brown and Campione, 1996, p.303).

### The proposed training programme

Teaching is a dynamic profession so aspects of teachers' instructional practice need to undergo regular changes to maintain the effectiveness of the teaching and learning activities (Ping Lim, 2009). Research studies have shown that

the beliefs are shaped by the teachers' previous experience and knowledge (Calderhead and Robson, 1991; Ertmer, 2005; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Kagan, 1992; Lim and Chan, 2007; Pajares, 1992) but teachers need to change their existing beliefs should their instructional practice be to experience sustainable change (Ertmer, 2005; Lim and Chan, 2007; Pajares, 1992). So, the designing and implementation of a training program on the learning communities approach will play a catalytic role in the proper teachers' development since they will have to opportunity to be educated in this new approach of language teaching and learning, the techniques they can use and the appropriate material they will have to use (Ko, 2013) to develop the four language skills of students in English as a foreign language.

### The design of the training programme

This proposed training programme was designed following the principles of the European commission according to which members recognized the priority for the improvement of the language skills and there have been proposed some practices that need to be followed by the European countries. Especially, in the era of multilingualism and multiculturalism, the development of students is more than a necessary part of the education system of each country. So, the teachers have to follow the growing needs of the students and the society for language improvement and participate in educational programs of training and professional development. Specifically, this programme was designed to include the basic elements that an EFL training programme should have and they are present below:

***Communication:*** In the teachers' development programme, it should be pinpointed that students communicate in the foreign language using their productive skills (Writing and Speaking) and their receptive skills (Listening and Reading). The trainees should realize that students have to engage in oral and written exchanges of material and to provide and obtain information. Also, the understanding of the spoken and written language plus the presenting information to listeners and readers constitute important elements of the language communication. So the development programme should give emphasis on the students' developing them. As for the learning community approach, the students are urged to use their four language skills as a critically active participant in editing information offered to them and outputting from them.

***Cultures:*** The trainees of a language teachers' professional development programme should realize that foreign language learners have to gain knowledge and understanding of other cultures. It must be clear that students should demonstrate an understanding of the peoples' practices and products and how they are linked to peoples' perspectives of the cultures. However, this era does not demand only the passive acceptance of the above but the critical dealing with them that can be offered by developing students' occupation with multimodal material in the foreign language lesson.

***Connections:*** It is imperative the language teachers motivate their students to make connections with other subject areas and to acquire information using the language as a means. The foreign language teachers' development programs should pay attention to guide language teachers create an environment in

which students use various resources in the language and culture studied with the aim of gaining useful information and of course they reinforce or expand their knowledge of other subject areas. They must reflect on them and act in various ways.

*Comparisons:* The section of "comparisons" must not be missed in a teachers' programme so that the trainee teachers can take it always into account. The students develop insight into the nature of the language and the culture by comparing the students' own language and culture to another. Students must be expected to demonstrate not only a basic but a deeper understanding of the nature of language and the concept of culture through comparing their own language and culture with the target language and culture and the relationships.

*Communities:* The last but not least elements that a foreign language teachers' programme should have is that teachers should understand that students participate in communities at home and around the world by using the target language. Teachers should encourage their students use the language both within and beyond the school setting through appropriate activities and show evidence of becoming life long learners by using the language for personal enrichment and career development. The language must be seen as a tool of expressing critically the views and the stances of the students besides the simple expression and the comprehension. All the above mention elements of a teachers' training programme are necessary for the trainees to be educated in developing learners' foreign language skills in the context of a learning community and all the teachers should be aware of them when teaching a foreign language.

## Implementation Procedures

This proposed training programme was designed to be implemented through three stages of training.

### a) Pre-Stage

A pre-record and analysis of the needs of EFL teachers will be conducted. The aim of is to investigate the stances and perspectives of the English language teachers in Greece regarding the methodology they follow while teaching or their general attitude towards learning a foreign language. There will be conducted discussions with the teachers at schools in order to facilitate and inform them about this training programme, the importance of students' active involvement in the teaching and learning process and of course their new role in the education of the 21$^{st}$ century as far as the foreign language education is concerned. Teachers will be offered questionnaires in order for the researchers to find out useful information about their teaching techniques, their tendencies and of course their views about what a learning community is and works out. All the above mentioned information will undergo qualitative analysis that will help the researcher to design in a more effective way this training programme on learning communities.

### b) Main- Stage

Throughout the main stage, the trainees will have the opportunity to be education in the methodology of foreign language development within a learning community context at school. The researcher/trainer will provide the participant teachers with a theoretical background concerning the theories and the methodologies in the foreign language teaching underlining the importance of the learning community approach. The session will cover several themes such as

- The definition of the learning community
- How it works out in the classroom
- The benefits on the teachers
- The benefits on the students
  - Linguistic benefits
  - Cognitive benefits
  - Psychological benefits
  - Social benefits
- Theoretical framework of activities developed within the context of the learning communities

Upon the completion of the theoretical training, the participants will have the opportunity to come into contact with multimodal material taken from classroom in which LC approach has been implemented. Videos and Photographs from classroom times of this approach will be shown to the teachers and the will develop discussions on what the lesson, the teachers' role, the students engagement, the difficulties students faced and their overall estimation about the teaching and learning process. In fact, they will keep their journals evaluating the above mentioned factors in the lessons they will watch.

### c) Follow-up stage

The follow up stage will take place after the completion of the main stage with the aim of ensuring that the teacher, who will use the proposed teaching method, design and implement their own intervention in a right way. Moreover, in this way, the researcher will have the opportunity to offer his/her feedback to all the participants who will try it in their school class and observe what techniques, activities and teaching processes are followed within or together with this approach by the teachers. Teachers who will follow this methodology will be offered the chance to reflect on their lessons and they will become aware of their students inclinations and expertises when acting in a LC context.

## Evaluation of the programme

For the evaluation of the programme, the researcher will use three research tools:

### a) the journal of the teacher/researcher

The structure of the researcher's journal will be based on the "questions for journal keeping" of Richards and Lockhart (1994). The questions of the journals that were set by the teacher/researcher focused on the fields.

### a) questions about instruction

1. What objectives did I set? To what extend did I achieve them?
2. What teaching material did I use? How effective were the teaching aids?

3. What forms of communication among the participant and the teacher were used?

*b) questions about participants' attitude and participation*

1. Which was the participants' attitude at the beginning, middle and at the end of each activity? How did I react?

*c) questions about the general estimation of the instruction.*

1) What went well and what did not? Why?

**b) the interviews with the participant teachers**

The second research tool that will be used in this training programme will be the interview with the trainees. The researcher/trainer designed and will use some basic but important questions for the participants. The questions will aim at the evaluation of the program by the trainees themselves and primarily refer to the extent at which they will gain the appropriate knowledge in the learning community approach, examples of the teaching practices at school, the activities that can be organised and the way the group will work and collaborate. Also, it is very important to mention that during the interview the trainer/trainers may go beyond these already designed questions and talk further with the participant so that he/she can feel more comfortable in conversations about his/her practice and sharing his/her individual perceptions (Richards and Lockhart 1991; Richards and Nunan 1990; Tzotzou 2014)

**c) the observation in the classes.**

The last research tool of this proposed training programme will be the trainees' observation by the trainers during a class hour. The trainer/s will complete observation of the teaching practices at school during the teaching hours of the English language lessons so that he/she will be able to offer feedback to the teacher who will follow the methodology of Learning Communities. Indeed, Wallace (1991) supports that through the observation, both observers and observes are given the opportunity to become aware of noted inconsistencies in the teaching practice (Wallace 1991) while the observers will have the chance to reflecting on how their trainees handle complex situations (Schön 1988). It is also worth noting that the trainer/trainers will use the protocol of the journal questions in order to evaluate the trainee and offer feedback with substantial and specific notes and details for his/her teaching.

**Conclusion**

This proposed programme aims at training EFL teachers on the education approach "Learning Communities" for the students' foreign language development in the era of the 21$^{st}$ century which has to master different educational challenges. Indeed, the current tendency for learning English as a foreign language by more and more people made the job of an English language teacher highly popular in Greece (Griva *et al.*, 2012), thus the challenge for better language education becomes bigger. In this age and era, classroom communities (teachers and students) are characterized by the need of change in the teaching and the learning process. Innovation and change are essential parts of teachers' development (Bailey 1992; Willis

and Willis 1996) especially in the language learning process. So, a training programme on this approach will help teachers be better able to monitor, make real-time decisions and respond to the changing needs of their students, reflecting on their own teachings (Yost *et al.*, 2000; McMeniman *et al.*, 2003). Indeed, the teachers are expected to help students influence and cooperate with each other and demonstrate their individual talents and various interpretations concerning the context of school lessons/subjects (Palaiologou and Dimitriadou, 2013).

Moreover, this training programme is expected to become a process that includes regular opportunities and experiences planned systematically, (Guskey 2000, Villegas-Reimers 2003) so that it can promote the growth and development in the profession of the FL teachers. It was set to serve special goals and its basic characteristics will be the ongoing assistance and support to the trainees, the existence of a link to school efforts in FL teaching while special emphasis will be placed on the self-instruction and differentiated training opportunities and the active roles of the trainees throughout the training programme (Sparks and Loucks-Horsley 1990; Villegas-Reimers 2003). The Department of Education of Greece has started to adjust to the European commission regarding the promotion of multilingualism and has agreed on a broad spectrum of foreign language policy goals so it has experienced certain initiatives to promote the teaching of English, French, German and Italian as FLs for the last decade (Griva and Iliadou, 2011: 18). This training programme can be a part of this longitudinal try of Greece to improve the foreign language teaching sector and the learners' language level and it is thought to bring about advantages to all the participants teachers. They will have the chance to get in touch with an innovative approach of foreign language teaching and of course they will be motivated to use it in their own class.

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