

# Language autobiographies and multilingual practices applied in primary teacher education: A qualitative study

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This research focuses on the impact of language autobiographies in promoting multilingualism practices and fostering the cultivation of respect towards linguistic and cultural diversity at educational contexts. It aims at investigating how language autobiographies, as a reflective practice, promote the development of students' critical linguistic awareness regarding stereotypes and language ideologies, and how it can contribute to the professional development of teachers engaged in multicultural classrooms across Europe. In terms of methodology, the study embraces qualitative methodological tools for analysing language autobiographies written by university students in Greece, within the framework of an inter-disciplinary E.U. project. The text analysis and the reflective views expressed by the pre-service teachers throughout the duration of the project suggest that language autobiographies can significantly benefit the school community. The writing process mobilises the linguistic repertoire of the learners and raises teachers' awareness about their students' spoken languages. This opportunity for free expression is particularly important for learners who have refugee and migrant backgrounds or belong to other minority communities, as their languages are often marginalised due to the predominance of the host country national language. Writing language autobiographies could thus become part of both initial teacher education and in-service training programs, as it is consistent with the critical emancipatory education principles and strongly promotes all citizens' equal participation in sociocultural actions.

## Introduction

Language autobiographies are integrated into the European Language Portfolio (ELP) and are embedded in a wider range of European language policies (Candelier, 2003; Baroni & Giroud, 2010: 64; Council of Europe, 2011) aiming at enhancing multilingualism and intercultural awareness (McConachy, Golubeva & Wagner, 2022) and further conceptualising the notion of global citizenship. In this regard, various educational projects have already been implemented in Europe focusing on introducing related teaching practices in different educational institutions and on the professional development of teachers. The concept of language autobiography

... nowadays embraces a wide range of approaches aiming at encouraging language learners to value their own linguistic repertoire within the plurilingual and multicultural contexts where this repertoire originates and evolves (Molinié, 2006: 7).

In educational terms, research on language autobiographies seeks to highlight language learning trajectories and give greater visibility to linguistic diversity. It provides a means of understanding language acquisition mechanisms and plurilingual awareness, and represents

a key element in developing teaching materials and implementing language-teaching strategies.

The issues of minority education have been raised strongly over the last decade as a result of global migration and the European refugee crisis. It is a well-known fact that Greece, along with other European countries, has taken in a very large number of refugees (Giavrimis & Dimitriadou, 2023) since the beginning of the humanitarian crisis (2015-2016). According to official UNHCR data, the total number of refugees that reached the country's mainland and island regions during this two-year period exceeded one million. Numerous initiatives have been undertaken since then by volunteer citizens, organisations, and educational institutions to support the newly arrived refugees (Skourtou et al., 2021). Even though significant progress has been made for improving different aspects of diverse multilingual communities' education, redefining the objectives and methods of language teaching remains crucial. The inquiry into the language ideologies and teaching approaches adopted by educators in the Greek school context demonstrates that a discrepancy is often observed between pedagogic theory and teaching practices, especially in the field of multilingual and multicultural education (Gkaintartzi & Tsokalidou, 2011; Thoma, 2022). Furthermore, the opportunities provided for teachers to engage in reflective processes (Winter, 1996; Danielson, 1989; Casas-Deseures, 2020) on their educational and social role appear scarce.

In the light of these findings, a research team from two European universities, the University of the Aegean, Greece, and Paris 8, Vincennes-Saint-Denis, France, undertook the development of the program *Language autobiographies: identities, languages, stories and multilingualism*. This program is being implemented in the framework of the European Reform University Alliance (ERUA, 2024) interdisciplinary collaborations and joint projects. Its key objectives are: (a) educating student practitioners and language teachers on multilingualism and developing their critical reflective skills on the linguistic diversity in modern societies (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Fons & Palou, 2011; Iversen, 2022; Darder, Hernandez, Lam & Baltodano, 2023); (b) investigating educational communities' representations on different languages and their acquisition (Castellotti & Moore, 2002; Cambra & Palou, 2007; López López & La Malfa, 2020); (c) promoting the practice of language autobiographies in mixed school classrooms (Molinié, 2014; Gómez-Pereira & Gebhard, 2023); and (d) establishing a corpus containing a selection of autobiographical texts (Le Fevre, 2011) that can be used to implement curriculum scenarios in diverse educational settings (Perregaux, 2002: 87).

## Theoretical framework

Language autobiographies represent a dynamic area of research in both humanities and social sciences, as a particular interest has been developed in recent decades, amongst others, in their sociolinguistic, historical, anthropological, literary, and educational aspects (Pavlenko, 2007: 164). If placed in the realm of sociolinguistics and pedagogy, constituting the basis of our study, such personal narratives (Baroni & Giroud, 2010: 66) reflect speakers' intention to portray, reconstruct, assess, and interpret the inner and exterior circumstances that defined their interactions with languages and their learning process

(Molinie, 2006: 2; Allouache, Blondeau, & Potolia, 2019). Language autobiographies thus enhance the self-awareness and self-esteem of the learners (Danielson, 1989), as they offer a critical approach to their encounters and interactions with different communities in which a variety of languages are often spoken (Kang, Gangopadhyay & Hall, 2022). Simultaneously, the narrators realise, in the process of composing their own autobiographical texts and of transferring their literacy practices and experiences onto paper (Perregaux, 2002: 83), that the realities experienced do not relate only to one's personal life, but also have social, political, cultural, and historical aspects.

The study of autobiographical texts marks a transition from the individual to the collective and provides a more substantial insight into the complexities of language expression at personal, familial, professional, and wider socio-cultural levels. This is because language repertoires are shaped within fluid social conditions and are influenced not only by social class or geographical mobility, but also by dominant institutions, ideologies and discourses embedded in a globalised context (Fairclough, 2013). The persistence of stereotyped representations about languages (Casas-Deseures, 2020), results, however, in the marginalisation and devaluation of minority native languages and of the bilingual/multilingual practices adopted by their communities (Skourtou et al., 2021). Deconstructing the stereotypes leading to the stigmatisation of language expression and the segregation of students with refugee or migrant backgrounds, should be at the core of any effort towards the democratisation of education (Freire, 1974/2001).

The critical investigation of the repertoires and the language representations shaped by both learners and teachers (Castellotti & Moore, 2002; Cambra & Palou, 2007; López López & La Malfa, 2020) is a prerequisite for the social transformation and the equal involvement of all language communities in the learning process and the wider societal upheavals. Hence, it is crucial to strengthen educational policies geared towards building critical linguistic awareness (Fairclough, 2013) regarding the significance of marginalised languages and varieties spoken by the learners in their everyday life and to further educate teachers (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Le Fevre, 2011; McConachy, Golubeva & Wagner, 2022) engaged in multicultural classrooms.

## **Research method**

Our research follows a set of joint initiatives undertaken by the European Reform University Alliance network that aims to strengthen the critical functioning of modern universities by drawing upon the diverse experiences and backgrounds of the academic community (ERUA, 2024). The project *Language autobiographies: Identities, languages, stories and multilingualism*, in which a group of researchers from the University of the Aegean and Paris 8, Vincennes Saint-Denis, participate adopted the principles of three previous European actions conducted by several partner countries, including Romania, Sweden, Germany, Poland, Portugal and Greece (Allouache, Blondeau & Potolia, 2019). The projects in question are *Kaleco* (led by Italy in 2008-2010) and PLURI-LA (2012-2014), as well as the most recent IRIS-Plurilingua (2017-2020) carried out by the University Paris 8 research team. These research interventions centred on mapping and enhancing

immigrant languages across different European countries and on valorising language autobiographies (LA) as pedagogical tools.

The first phase of the ERUA project was held at the University of the Aegean, in the island of Rhodes, Greece, with the participation of all members of the research team from both Greece and France. The project was launched in May 2023 and aimed at: (a) elaborating on the theoretical background of language autobiographies (Pavlenko, 2007); (b) analysing representations and dominant conceptions about different languages (Castellotti & Moore, 2002; Nekvapil, 2003; Cambra & Palou, 2007; López López & La Malfa, 2020); (c) using language autobiographies in Greek language teaching (Foulidi, Oikonomakou & Papakitsos, 2019); and (d) training future teachers on bilingualism and multilingualism (Le Fevre, 2011; Allouache, Blondeau, & Potolia, 2019). The main research question of the intervention was, therefore, how language autobiographies could become an important aspect of teachers' education and training in Greece, considering the discrepancy that exists between the academic debate and the educational reality, mainly focusing on monolingual teaching practices.

The twenty-seven participants, five being members of the research team and twenty-two preservice students at the Department of Primary Education, critically explored the concept of language autobiographies, examined bilingual/multilingual texts, and produced their own autobiographies. Among the twenty-two participants, twenty students were female and two males, as the students attending the Department of Education are mostly females. Three of the female students were of a more mature age, having enrolled at the Department after completing their first degrees, while four were bilingual, with one of the parents being from a country other than Greece (Austria, Armenia, Sweden and Albania).

At the very start of the sessions, audiovisual material, slide presentations and a variety of textual genres (literary extracts, interviews, songs, pictures, etc.), in both Greek and French, were used to familiarise the participants with the content of language autobiographies (Allouache, Blondeau & Potolia, 2019). These texts, which were provided for study prior to the beginning of the sessions, served as triggers for the trainees to develop, through the bilingual/multilingual writers' experiences and internal conflicts, their reflection on the impact of intercultural communication and its sociological aspects. The five members of the research group then read aloud to all participants their own autobiographies, encouraging an exchange of opinions, and thereby fostering a sense of trust and safety within the literacy community (Le Fevre, 2011; Skourtou et al., 2021). The autobiographies written in French by the three Paris V members were translated into Greek, the common language of communication among the other participants.

Language autobiographies authoring was a reflective writing process that took place gradually in various scheduled sessions (Casas-Deseures, 2020). As these were personal texts, no specific instructions were given as to their length, structure, or organisation of ideas. Subsequently, students who so wished were invited to share excerpts from their texts. All students positively contributed to the endeavour by reading aloud part of their autobiographies, since, as they argued, listening to the research team members' autobiographies, two of whom are professors at their Faculty, made them feel at ease and

encouraged them to freely share their own experiences and stories within the group. As an extension of their training, all students outlined, at the end of this workshop, effective teaching strategies focusing on the application of language autobiographies in Greek primary schools.

Following the implementation of the training program, students were granted a 15-day period to process their own autobiographies and upload them to a digital environment where the research team members' texts, some of them bilingual, had already been added. To further foster free expression, no word count limit or guidelines were provided, but all of the resulting documents, written in Greek, ranged in length between one and a half or two pages (see relevant extracts in the Appendix). The research team proceeded to critically discuss the 22 language autobiographies written by the participants adopting qualitative data processing methods. The texts were examined on the basis of inductive content analysis that "moves from the specific to the general, so that particular instances are observed and then combined into a larger whole or general statement" (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008: 109).

Through this process, themes and categories emerged from the data through the researcher's careful examination and constant comparison (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005). The data extracted were classified into specific conceptual categories that span the corpus and strongly relate to key research questions about the participants' association of languages and the sociolinguistic representations they have formed of their own linguistic repertoire. Since the main purpose was to explore students' representations of languages (Castellotti & Moore, 2002; Cambra & Palou, 2007; Bonta & Galița, 2011; Iversen, 2022) the qualitative content analysis was supported by critical annotations grounded on the systemic functional grammar principles (Fairclough, 2013; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Maingueneau, 2014/2021) facilitating the interpretation of authors' language choices in relation to various socio-cultural aspects that emerged from their texts. It is worth noting that data were also cross checked against those collected from the journals maintained by the research team and from anonymous questionnaires filled out by the participants at the end of the sessions aiming at evaluating different aspects of the training intervention.

### **Data processing**

A key aspect highlighted through the analysis of the language autobiographies is that of the multifaceted and complex relationship developed by the preservice students towards languages, since they are strongly considered as an expression of their individual and social identities (Besemeres, 2004; Cambra & Palou, 2007; Baroni & Giroud, 2010; Fons & Palou, 2011; Iversen, 2022; Oikonomakou, Frazis & Evangelinou-Yiannakis 2022). In this respect, linguistic repertoire assumes a significant role, encompassing the set of resources available to speakers in terms not only their first language, but of other languages or varieties spoken in different, usually non formal, socio-cultural contexts (Zentella, 1997; D'warte, 2014). The research data available indicated that the participants in our study were plurilingual, since, in addition to their first language, in this case Greek, they also had greater or lesser fluency of a second and, more often, of a foreign language. More specifically, all claimed to have a certain level of proficiency, ranging from poor to

proficient, in English. This fact is interpreted by the mandatory instruction of English as a core language within the Greek education system (Giavrimis & Dimitriadou, 2023) and, in many cases, by its parallel tutoring in private schools. Among other languages that were frequently encountered in students' linguistic repertoire are French, German, and Italian, with the first two also being widely introduced in the Greek educational system as foreign languages (from age ten and onwards). Some other languages, such as Spanish, Arabic, Japanese, Korean and Armenian, are also mentioned, but they are scarcely cited.

It is worth emphasising that the notion of linguistic repertoire also entails aspects of language differentiation (Tollefson, 2007), referring to regional, social, or contextual differences that a particular language may include. Consequently, in the language autobiographies examined, references are made to various dialects, including ones originating from the Greek islands of Crete, Rhodes, Symi and Kos, associated with the students' native regions. The awareness of these dialects results at a microscopic level from their use within the family context by relatives, such as grandparents, as well as at a macroscopic level from their use in the local communities where the students grew up (Allouache, Blondeau & Potolia, 2019; Iversen, 2022). These factors lend a strongly experiential and affective dimension to language varieties' presence (Baroni & Giroud, 2010), interfacing them with familiar figures, sounds and precious memories (Zentella, 1997) (see Example 1). In other instances, using a dialect within a wider community, such as the academic one, functions as a connecting element, a distinctive identifier that fosters "*genuine*" communication with individuals of common backgrounds (Ex. 2).

- Ex. 1 I speak the Cretan dialect at the village, and the Greek at school, of course. Countless Cretan words, nicknames, songs, and poems... I don't even know their spelling. I prefer using them with my loved ones, back home. (Text 8).
- Ex. 2 During my university years, Rhodes' dialect served as the link between students who came from the island, at times for one joke's sake and, at other times, to further facilitate genuine interactions. (Text 4).

It appears, however, that some students have embodied a stereotypical perception of there being one officially recognised language that they are expected to learn and speak properly. Hence, other language varieties tend to be associated with widespread sociolinguistic representations (Freire, 1974/2001; Fairclough, 2013; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), since their speakers, who tend to have "*a very strong accent*" (Ex. 3) are usually conceived as older individuals coming from a lower economic, social and educational stratum (Tollefson, 2007). The dialectical elements, mainly encountered in students' spoken language, are regarded as language forms dating far back into the past, expressing outdated cultural traditions and regressive beliefs. In some cases, the use of dialect can be a source of ridicule and is accompanied by negative emotions, due to their being stigmatised by speakers of the official language, mainly in major city centres (Ex. 4).

- Ex. 3 One of my fellow students, who came from a small village of Kos, used to tell me that I have a very strong accent and that my way of speaking reminded her of her grandmother who speaks the local dialect in the same manner. (Text 7).

- Ex. 4 When I speak, people can tell where I come from, because of my accent. I am usually quite happy about that. However, I sometimes find it embarrassing when people laugh or can't quite understand what I'm trying to say. (Text 1).

On the contrary, all references made to the official variety focus on its long history, its cultural impact, its diversity, and the influence it has exerted on other languages on a lexical, cultural, and ideological level (Ex. 5, 6). In a considerable part of our sample, students, as native speakers, even experience a sense of both pride and responsibility for the maintenance and correct use of the Greek language (Ex. 7). Thus, consolidated perceptions about the significance of the official languages tend to emerge from the language autobiography writing process, as these standard forms seem to be dominant over other language varieties, being embedded in prestige due to their formal institutionalisation at state level and their systematic instruction in schools (Tollefson, 2007). It should be stressed, however, that in the last few years, systematic efforts have been undertaken towards the valorising of dialectical elements in mainstream classrooms, under the impact of linguistics that regards all varieties as equally complex, valid, and full-fledged forms of expression.

- Ex. 5 Greek is one of the most ancient languages having a very long history. Numerous foreign language words are of Greek origin. (Text 7).
- Ex. 6 I consider Greek to be a unique and meaningful language, rich in history, and with a large variety of dialects. (Text 22).
- Ex. 7 Receiving such stimuli, I always feel a sense of pride. I was always conscious of a heavy duty, being a competent speaker of my language, and a bearer of assuring its sustainability. (Text 15).

The influence exerted by the family and social milieu not only determines students' attitude towards the active use of different varieties, but also catalyses their foreign language learning process from an early age. The participants underline the significance of receiving encouragement and support from family members - who frequently live or interact with multilingual communities in progressively developing a wider multilingual repertoire (Ex. 8, 9). The concept of language learning motivation (Dörnyei, 1990), as it is intertwined with future teachers' identities (Cummins et al., 2015; Cummins, 2021) and their ideological views on languages (Fairclough, 2013), has been systematically investigated throughout this qualitative research (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Students' language autobiographies (Casas-Deseures, 2020; López López & La Malfa, 2020; Shin & Jang, 2023) hence reveal that these motives are mainly correlated with: (a) the acquisition of skills and competences required for their professional development; (b) their own cultural heritage and affiliations; (c) the fulfilment of daily communicative needs; and (d) a growing sense of world citizenship in the context of a globalised society. In the case of (a), acquiring knowledge and skills, accompanied by the award of foreign language certificates, enhances students' professional profile, thus increasing their chances of finding a rewarding job (Ex. 10, 11).

- Ex. 8 My grandfather George had a passion for languages and socialised with many different ethnic groups. I remember him telling my older cousins: "Did you all learn any languages today?" (Text 5).

- Ex. 9 The Italian language and culture have always been present in my entourage through my father and aunt, who studied in Pisa, and are fluent in Italian. (Text 12).
- Ex. 10 I also started attending a tutoring center to keep up with the necessary "papers". (text 20).
- Ex. 11 English, as it turned out, became a useful foreign language, contributing both to my personal development, mostly by reading books, and to my later professional development at an academic level. (Text 3).

There are also several references in the educators' autobiographies to the cultural heritage or baggage of languages (Allouache, Blondeau & Potolia, 2019), thus emphasising the aesthetic pleasure of being able to watch a film without subtitles, read a literary text, admiring a painting for aesthetic pleasure, smelling a particular aroma associated with a specific culture, like one of Proust's madeleines, or even listening to a song in its authentic version (Ex. 12, 13). In many instances, cultural products, as a form of artistic and (inter) cultural expression, are the ones encouraging individuals to engage in foreign language learning (Ex. 14) (Dörnyei, 1990), while, in fewer cases, students bring into the classroom a multitude of stereotypes about languages, cultures, historical facts or native speakers that are often disseminated through pop culture texts and media (Ex. 15).

- Ex. 12 English has always been for me the language of music and cinema. (Text 22).
- Ex. 13 In my room you'll encounter some of my paintings. There is always something French framed on the walls, or maybe the house will smell of croissants· you may even catch echoing "La vie en rose". (Text 14).
- Ex. 14 I started watching "anime" and "Korean dramas" and became a fan of K-pop bands, which sparked my interest in further exploring Japanese and Korean culture, both of which I absolutely adore. (Text 6).
- Ex. 15 I opted for French instead of German at school. German kind of evoked images from the occupation, mainly because of the movies. I now find this regrettable. (Text 13).

Travelling, on the other hand, requires daily communicative needs, such as making new acquaintances, communicating, and cultivating close or long-distance relationships with other people also serve as incentives for language learning. The dynamics of the new technologies further facilitates the abolishment of conventional boundaries or restrictions (Ex. 16, 17). By reflecting on their autobiographical texts, students are expressing their need to belong to a globalised, democratic community, where language proficiency ensures the meaningful interaction of all individuals without racial or any other kind of discrimination. In this sense, future teachers are aware of how languages and intercultural expression are interwoven with the principles of critical language education (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Darder, Hernandez, Lam & Baltodano, 2023) aimed at social transformation and citizens' emancipation (Freire, 1974/2001; Fairclough, 2013) (Ex. 18, 19).

- Ex. 16 People should be happy with their decision to learn a foreign language. They will discover a new means of communication, enabling them to express themselves and socialize with those surrounding them. (Text 7).
- Ex. 17 One of my greatest dreams is to travel to different countries and to be able to interact with the locals as easily as I do in my first language. (Text 11).



- Ex. 18 I hope the foreign languages I have learned will allow me to be part of a wider community, to become a citizen of the world and not only of Greece. (Text 21).
- Ex. 19 I love that languages transcend national boundaries enabling genuine interactions between people regardless of their place of origin, religion, mentality, and political beliefs. (Text 5).

A key aspect emerging from the data analysis strongly involves educational policy issues (Candelier, 2003). Foreign language learning in Greece is carried out in both formal and non-formal settings. The compulsory teaching of English as a core foreign language, even though it was institutionalised under law (No. 1566/1985), has been generally implemented in primary schools since 1993. In the same year, the option of a second foreign language (French or German) was introduced into secondary education, and it was also piloted from 2005 in the last two grades of primary education. However, most of the students, in addition to school language training, enroll in specialised courses or attend tutoring at private schools (Ex. 20). In some cases, language learning occurs in a non-institutionalised context, as friends and relatives informally undertake the task of teaching the younger learners. Besides the decisive influence of the family members and of the Greek educational context (Gkaintartzi & Tsokalidou, 2011; Giavrimis & Dimitriadou, 2023), other crucial factors contributing to the shaping of plurilingual repertoires are one's personal inclinations and preferences, systematic engagement, and deep love of reading. This is, as pointed out, an ongoing process within the scope of lifelong learning (Ex. 21, 22).

- Ex. 20 English was not something I was able to pick up well at school. Like most, I joined a language school, and then had some private lessons. I was also practicing with a friend of mine! (Text 8).
- Ex. 21 The journey of language learning is endless. Greek language... all languages are infinite. While searching, you will discover more, and the quest never ends! (Text 7)
- Ex. 22 Each person should be individually eager to seek and engage in the language learning process, and thus in cultivating his/her own intellectual growth. (Text 8).

The students, through their lengthy narratives, also underlined the impact of the teacher's role in fostering an enthusiastic and positive attitude towards foreign language learning. The more engaged, committed, passionate and supportive the teacher is, the more he or she can motivate and inspire the learners (Ex. 23). In some cases, a teacher's communication skills, love of teaching and personality traits are even considered more important than the knowledge of the learner's first language (Ex. 24). To the extent that a skilled and engaged educator can inspire and exert a positive influence on foreign language learning, another educator can, for various reasons, make learners feel discouraged, less motivated, and even resentful of the learning process (Ex. 25, 26). Thus, we could postulate that learners' representations and ideologies (Bonta & Galița, 2011; D'warte, 2014; Thoma, 2022) are inextricably intertwined with their own educational path and life experiences. It is indicative that their texts are characterised by the prevalence of interpersonal function features (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), as they tend to use a great number of evaluative adjectives, and emotionally charged vocabulary, when describing their interactions with their teachers.

- Ex. 23 I could clearly discern on her face a genuine love and a keen interest in this language, both of which she was able to project onto me. (Text 20).
- Ex. 24 The instructor, being from Uruguay, did not have any command of Greek, so our communication commenced in English. With this educator, everything seemed easy! His infectiveness and warm personality enabled me to trust him and try to further express myself in Spanish. (Text 2).
- Ex. 25 I didn't like English as a language, and the teacher had a great part to play in this; she failed to properly convey to me the necessary skills and, as a result, even though I had been studying English for eight years, I still struggle speaking it fluently. (Text 4).
- Ex. 26 I stopped learning Arabic because of that teacher.... He didn't like his job, he felt bossy and unwilling to assist us, to encourage us discover the magic of this precious language. (Text 11).

Language learning emerges as a profoundly psycho-emotional experience, because learners, as they point out explicitly or implicitly in their narratives (Baroni & Giroud, 2010), shape their attitudes towards a language based on a wide range of positive or negative emotions (Besemeres, 2004), such as excitement, joy, love - but also anxiety and fear (Ex. 27, 28). Several students stressed how the absence of personal autonomy or motivation made their learning path difficult. This is because learning certain languages that are predominant in a globalised setting, such as English, is perceived as imperative and is sometimes carried out under the pressure of one's narrow or wider social circle (Ex. 29), thus further contributing to minority languages' marginalization (Candelier, 2003). Such personal freedom comes at a later age, when young people, disengaged from social norms, choose to engage with languages considered less widespread or mainstream (ex. 30). Maturity is also a determining factor for maintaining heritage languages (Aravossitas & Oikonomakou, 2020; Kang, Gangopadhyay & Hall, 2022; Gómez-Pereira & Gebhard, 2023), as evidenced by the few cases of the bilingual students we detected in our sample. These are mainly third-generation immigrants' children wishing to reconnect with their relatives or their communities (Ex. 31) and to negotiate aspects of their own identities (Cummins, 2021).

- Ex. 27 Self-confidence is essential when dealing with languages, perhaps even more important than knowledge itself. (Text 17).
- Ex. 28 My parents made futile attempts at persuading me to carry on learning French. The whole experience had a very negative impact on me, causing a strong feeling of pressure. As a result, I am not even able to remember the alphabet! (Text 6)
- Ex. 29 During my school years, English was linked to a series of exams. I was expected to complete my English lessons before starting my university admission exam. This put a lot of pressure on me at a very young age, resulting in me feeling uncomfortable and developing a negative view on language learning. (Text 21).
- Ex. 30 As I grew up, I was finally able to do as I pleased. I started learning Arabic, so that I would one day be able to teach refugee children. (Text 2)
- Ex. 31 Armenian was mostly spoken by my grandfather. I can only understand a few words or phrases. As I am now attending university, I am considering trying to learn more about my grandparents' language, to reconnect with my origins. (Text 5)

## Discussion

Composing language autobiographies can become a highly rewarding process offering numerous advantages for the authors (Bonta & Galița, 2011), particularly if they have a professional background in the field of language education. By depicting their own personal path via writing, they are able to reconstruct their learning process, reflecting on its barriers and achievements (Todeva & Cenoz, 2009; Allouache, Blondeau & Potolia, 2019). They are also encouraged to process the critical factors that have shaped their engagement with the use of different languages in various sociocultural contexts (Danielson, 1989; Casas-Deseures, 2020). While authoring their language autobiographies, students emphasised their perception of language learning as a lifelong process taking place in both formal and non-formal educational contexts. They also highlighted the crucial role, either positive or negative, teachers have in developing their students' linguistic repertoire. This awareness adds value in recognising the multi-dimensional character of language acquisition, while promoting the cultivation of empathy and educational accountability. Thus, creating autobiographical texts encourages the development of active learning communities (Skourtou et al., 2021) in the classroom and bridges the gap between teachers and learners, as they are given the opportunity to jointly contribute to the educational process (Pavlenko, 2007), to exchange views on their language registers (Le Fevre, 2011) and to critically examine the underlying attitudes they have developed about the languages and/or the varieties (Tollefson, 2007) spoken in their everyday lives.

Family and social environment also seem to be decisive in influencing both the selection of foreign language learning as well as its use in different contexts. Various motives, both internal and external, as well as different psychological factors (Besemeres, 2004), intervene in language acquisition and affect learners' progress and responsiveness to the textual stimuli they experience in their social interactions. Language autobiographies thus stress aspects related to language ideologies, highlighting authors' pre-existing views and experiences, and shedding light on the socio-cultural context in which they were constructed (Castellotti & Moore, 2002; Allouache, Blondeau & Potolia, 2019; Thoma, 2022). In the case of our enquiry, students' experiential texts (Iversen, 2022) demonstrate the presence of an inextricable link between their linguistic expression and their own cultural heritage (Aravossitas & Oikonomakou, 2020). It is a historical, social, and cultural grounded affinity, a rapport that elicits positive or negative connotations, reproducing occasionally even stereotyped conceptions (Fairclough, 2013) about language diversity. It is therefore argued that languages constitute a key element in shaping individual and collective identities (Baroni & Giroud, 2010; Cummins et al., 2015; Cummins, 2021).

Multilingualism constitutes another shared feature among the autobiographies examined, in which students negotiate and discuss languages while composing the mosaic of their own linguistic repertoire (Candelier, 2003; Council of Europe, 2011). Apart from Greek, the participants' dominant first language, a plurilingual canvas is thus portrayed, since the authors display solid skills in English and in a range of other foreign languages, more and less widely diffused. This kind of mapping, carried out at a personal level, could

progressively increase their critical awareness (Fairclough, 2013) regarding linguistic diversity with the aim of transcending the discriminatory attitudes and stereotypes (Cambra & Palou, 2007; López López & La Malfa, 2020) that they have encountered at some point in their lives. Multilingualism thus emerges as an element of cultural enrichment (Perregaux, 2002; Molinié, 2006, 2014), as an educational asset responding to the professional development and social progress of the teachers (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005), nursing, at the same time, their personal growth. It is becoming more and more clear, on the other hand, that the language learning process amounts to an ongoing undertaking related to personal conflicts and inner struggles. It offers insights into the ways in which an individual constructs a more fluid and complex identity when placed in different discourse and learning communities (Todeva & Cenoz, 2009). The awareness of identity as being a fluid, dynamic and multidimensional construct is essential for an emergent critical and transformative education (Freire, 1974/2001), capable of embracing all learning communities (Gkaintartzi & Tsokalidou, 2011), especially the most marginalised.

## Conclusions

Cultivating the multilingual and intercultural awareness of pre-service teachers (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Fons & Palou, 2011; McConachy, Golubeva & Wagner, 2022) expected to teach in multicultural classrooms (Cummins, 2021), in which students of refugee or immigrant backgrounds may be present (Gkaintartzi & Tsokalidou, 2011; Skourtou et al., 2021), poses significant challenges for any educational institution, requiring structural changes, constant effort, and sufficient time. It is precisely in response to these challenges that language autobiographies could give a viable answer, for they are grounded essentially on reflection (Winter, 1996) through personal written expression. They could significantly support the development of a new language teaching curriculum for multilingual communities (Castellotti & Moore, 2002: 21; Darder et al., 2023) enabling teachers to share their own painful stories, revealing their sociocultural inequalities, to demonstrate their personal struggles as literacy learners and to discuss the resilience mechanisms deployed so as to transform any adverse situation into empowerment (Le Fevre, 2011: 779). In doing so, teachers create the basis for building social-oriented literacy communities promoting a more meaningful understanding of students' trajectories and a deeper empathy towards their everyday lives (Perregaux, 2002; Besemeres, 2004; Molinié, 2014).

As far as Greece is concerned, the research in this area seems very limited, as the educational system remains highly centralised and focuses mainly on first language teaching (Foulidi, Oikonomakou & Papakitsos, 2019). Despite the large number of refugees and migrants (Skourtou et al., 2021; Giavrimis, & Dimitriadou, 2023) living in the country, language autobiographies are not sufficiently used as critical pedagogical tools for empowering learners who experience various challenges in their social environment. Since they do not constitute an important part of the teaching practices proposed in the L1 Curricula, language autobiographies have no significant contribution in terms of nurturing reflective skills (Gkaintartzi, & Tsokalidou, 2011; Thoma, 2022; Shin & Jang, 2023) among the educational community. Therefore, their use is mainly limited to primary school

teachers' personal initiatives and commitment. Meeting such challenges could be accomplished through the redefinition of Greek higher education curriculum philosophy and the interdisciplinary collaboration between universities and other social institutions.

Since literacy practices are being increasingly shaped by cross-border movements or diverse literacy repertoires (Kang, Gangopadhyay & Hall, 2022), consolidating common transnational projects should be prioritised, so as to ensure the extroverted societal engagement of educators. Integrating language autobiographies into the core of teaching interventions can be beneficial for various learner groups. In addition to minority language learners of immigrant and refugee background, language autobiographies could be used in heritage language teaching (Aravossitas & Oikonomakou, 2020), because they constitute a form of identity texts (Cummins et al., 2015; Cummins, 2021; Skourtou et al., 2021) that foster critical language awareness (Fairclough, 2013) and support heritage language learners' identity investment (Oikonomakou, Frazis & Evangelinou-Yiannakis, 2022).

Moreover, at the end of the training course, the students involved completed a questionnaire to assess their experience of this initiative. Their very encouraging feedback concerns not only different aspects of the program, but also the significance of: (a) extending the training interventions over a longer period of time, with a view of increasing the number of educators from various European countries through international exchanges; (b) establishing a teacher's practicum on multilingualism, in cooperation with diverse educational institutions; (c) collecting and processing language autobiographies composed by pupils from Greek and not-Greek primary schools; (d) creating a multilingual data corpus including autobiographical narratives of university students and teaching staff members (Baroni & Giroud, 2010; Allouache, Blondeau & Potolia, 2019); and (e) creating educational material for diverse groups of multilingual learners.

These recommendations raised by the participants throughout this project have already been integrated into the subsequent phases of the ERUA project *Language autobiographies: Identities, languages, stories and multilingualism* that will be carried out in both Greece and France during 2024-2025. An action plan has also been formulated encouraging other European university departments to participate in this ongoing endeavor. Observations and findings from this initial study could thus constitute a solid basis for further scientific research aiming at reshaping the landscape of European higher education curricula (and, indeed the attitudes of teachers in primary and secondary schools towards multilingualism).

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## Appendix: A sample of extracts from language autobiographies

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Participant 12 (text in Greek)	One language that I love as much as Greek is Italian. The Italian language and culture have always been present in my entourage through my father and aunt, who studied in Pisa, and are fluent in Italian. While my aunt married and moved to Italy, none of her children learnt Greek. On the summers when they visited us as young children, we would communicate through playing without experiencing a language barrier. As time went by, I longed to learn Italian too so that I could participate in their conversations, to understand what the Italian songs and movies we watched together were about.
Participant 1 (text in Greek)	I was also introduced to the German language from a very early age, in a quite coercive way. Due to my Austrian nationality and my aunt being a German teacher, it was obvious for my parents that I would have to learn this language. So when the lessons commenced, I knew right from the very first exposure to the language that I was not keen on it. At elementary, when parents were invited to enroll their children for a second foreign language, I took the opportunity to escape a bit from the German I was learning at home, so I happily ran around shouting for them to enroll me in French, but my mom announced to me that German would be the language they would enroll me in: "You have been learning German with your aunt for so long now. It will be a piece of cake!"

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Research team member (text in English)	I can now speak, read and write in both my languages – English and Greek – and I hope I will never be silenced again. But more importantly, now working with migrant, refugee and Roma children, my work is focused on giving all children a voice, agency, empowerment and opportunity.
Research team member (text in French)	My mother tongue is, irreducibly, <i>ad libitum</i> , French. It's my mother's language, my maternal grandmother's language. It's matrilineal. It was passed on to me by women, through women's voices and physical forms. It's musical and deeply intellectual too, enabling me to express, as accurately as possible, my thoughts, to communicate my unique rapport with the world.
Research team member, (text in French)	I just cannot bring myself to write my language autobiography. I couldn't figure out exactly why it's so hard for me to get started. Something always holds me back, blocks me, paralyses me. And that something undoubtedly has its roots in my childhood, in a series of deceptions.
Research team member (text in Greek)	I became aware of how deeply imbued I was with the French language during that period when I started having dreams in French and when at times the French word/ expression would first pop into my head followed by the Greek one. In some of my phrases I would also occasionally use both languages combined in a synthesis, using unconsciously features of translanguaging.

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