

Refugee children in primary education: Outlining their profile and aspects of their L2 Greek development

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The refugee crisis has led to a great number of refugee children entering formal Greek education since 2015 (Cholezas 2018; UNHCR 2020). In the past, migrant pupils in Greek education had basic to intermediate Greek language skills (Tzevelekou et al. 2013), good oral narrative abilities in Greek while also outperforming L1 peers in some narrative measures (Andreou 2015). In contrast, the characteristics of newcomer pupils with a refugee background are rather understudied, with very few exceptions (see Paradis et al. 2020 for Syrian refugee children in Canada). The objective of the present study is to shed light onto L2 Greek learners with a refugee background by outlining their profile and by systematically presenting their cognitive and linguistic characteristics.

Fifty-three refugee children in Reception Classes between the ages of 7 and 13 years participated in the study. They completed an extensive literacy and language background questionnaire, the Raven's Coloured Progressive Matrices to assess their general intelligence, and a Digit Backwards Task to examine their verbal working memory. Their L2 Greek proficiency was evaluated with the Diapolis Placement test, while a story retelling task (MAIN; Gagarina et al. 2012) was used in order to explore the micro- and macro-structure of their L2 oral narrative skills. A group of 50 L1 Greek peers was also tested for control purposes.

The background questionnaire showed that Kurdish was the most common L1 for the refugee learners and that their L1 was more frequently used than their L2. This finding is in accordance with greater self-estimated speaking ability in the L1, but in contrast with better self-estimated writing and reading abilities in the L2. Their proficiency level in Greek was considerably low, between the A0 and A1 levels, yet their performance was not consistent across all language subskills. In the narrative task, the experimental group seemed to poorly comprehend the stories and produce rather short and incoherent narrations compared to the control group. Differences were also found in verb diversity and syntactic complexity between the two groups, revealing a significantly lower performance for the L2 group. Regression analyses on the refugee children's performance revealed that Greek language proficiency was a significant predictor of their narrative abilities. More specific significant predicting relationships were also uncovered within micro- and macro-level variables of narrative abilities, like story comprehension predicting the structural cohesion of the produced narrative. The findings will be discussed in relation to previous studies with migrant children enrolled in Greek education, but also in relation to recent studies with refugee children which point out that this population manifests a very characteristic profile that has impact on their L2 development.

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