Online Learning in Modern Digital Era: A Distance Training Program for Greek Language Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of this study, which was part of a broader research on Greek minority education in Albania, was the evaluation of a training program tailored to language teachers' needs who teach Greek in bilingual/intercultural environments. In particular, the study attempted to contribute the development of an integrated framework for the training of language teachers in the modern educational process. Specifically, distance training was carried out, in modern and asynchronous environments through a training platform. According to the mapping of the needs of the Greek Language teachers in bilingual educational environments throughout Albania and based on the specifications dictated by the international literature, 10 thematic modules were designed with modern methods in the instruction of Greek.

Method: The training program was implemented in 43 language teachers of Greek minority education in Albania from the area of Argyrokastro, Delvino and Agioi Saranda. For the evaluation of the program four forms were utilized that were carried out at different stages of the program: a) Initial, b) Formative, c) Final and d) Follow-up Evaluation. To collect the quantitatively data, four questionnaires were distributed at all stages of the training program to trainees.

Results: The results indicated the effectiveness of the training program and highlighted the active involvement of trainees in all stages of the program. It revealed the development of teachers' ability to take decisions in order to improve daily teaching routines with the ultimate goal of achieving a quality language education in bilingual/intercultural environments. The trainees acquired, through digital learning processes, the ability to implement innovative language activities in their classrooms, laying the foundations for the consolidation of a modern way of thinking of language teachers.

Implications: The collection of data will contribute to the implementation of more effective training programs in the region and the application of modern teaching methods by teachers who teach in bilingual/intercultural environments in general.

KEYWORDS

Greek minority education, teachers training, Greek language teachers, bilingual learning environments, distance training program

INTRODUCTION

In modern educational environments, teachers' training constitutes the response to the constantly changing educational conditions (Sadeghi & Richards, 2021). A well trained teacher uses and implements modern methodological approaches and at the same time he/she adopts a critical attitude towards teaching and the educational environment as a whole (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2010). Training can equip teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills for the modernization of educational work in the contemporary era, with the goal of improving the entire educational system (Malik, 2018). Moreover, training activities constitute the cornerstone of education, gradually guiding the language teacher towards reflective thinking (Korthagen, 2017), providing a deeper understanding of processes, and offering an effective language teaching.

In this direction, and based on the innovative pedagogy (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2020), language teacher training is modernized through innovative, and contemporary educational methods that are "translated" into the Blended Learning Model (Crăciun, 2019). More specifically, distance learning constitutes an innovation within a constantly changing social, educational, and cultural environment (Lassoued et al., 2020; Sadeghi, 2019; Zawacki-Richter, 2021). In a framework that promotes interaction, collaboration, and self-directed learning in digital environments, the involvement of teachers in authentic learning situations is enhanced, with distance learning evolving and establishing itself as the most flexible professional development approach in the modern era (Simonson et al., 2019). In fact, according to the requirements of the European Union, training programs for language teachers should be based on modern training methods, taking advantage of the benefits offered by information and communication technologies. Moreover, distance education is a continuous and constantly evolving process that contributes to the creation of environments that eliminate any time and spatial constraints. In such a context, teachers' training is a challenge for teachers themselves (Sert, 2021), with the contemporary educational reality being the determining factor regarding the position and role of training programs in the overall educational process (Pokrovskaia et al., 2021). More specifically, the combination of synchronous and asynchronous digital environments has a catalytic impact on shaping positive attitudes among the trained teachers, mobilizing and actively engaging them, enhancing students' academic performance, and promoting flexibility, creativity, accessibility, and effectiveness of

language teachers (Blignaut et al., 2010; Crawford & Jenkins, 2018; Holmes & Prieto-Rodriguez, 2018). In this way, they will develop students' skills of the 21st century, contributing to the establishment of a modern and scientifically substantiated educational framework regarding the language lesson for future citizens.

For the purpose of the study, the following objectives were set:

(1) To identify the training needs of Greek minority education teachers in Albania

(2) To record their preferences and their suggestions regarding the implementation and evaluation of training programs

(3) To estimate the contribution of the blended distance learning training program to the development of their content knowledge and skills.

(4) To estimate the effectiveness of the distance training program as evaluated by the teachers themselves.

Literature review

The concept of lifelong training (see Figure 1) refers to a modern teacher characterized by essential components that include: a) modern and diverse forms of literacy, b) mathematical thinking, c) multicultural awareness, d) digital literacy, e) personal learning, f) entrepreneurial thinking, and

Figure 1

Professional Learning Model (European Commission, 2018)
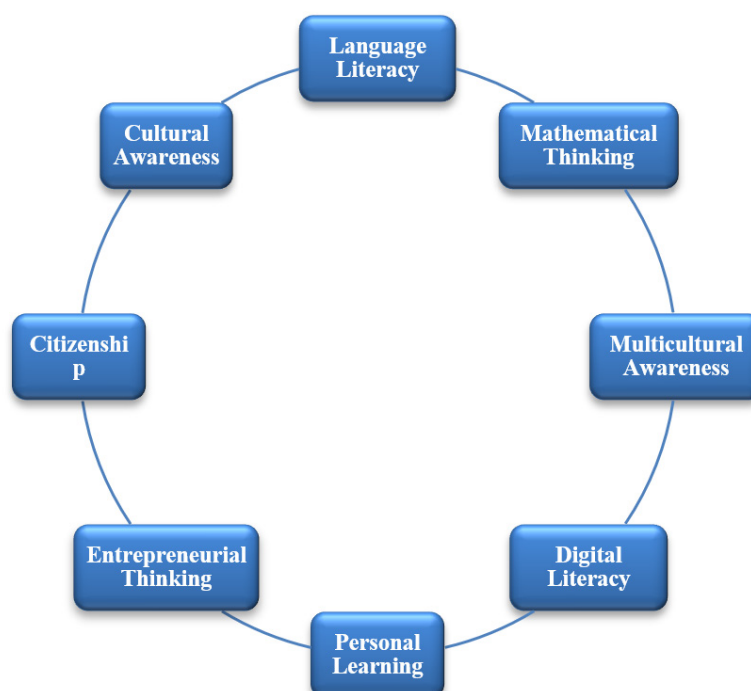
g) citizenship (Al Khateeb, 2017). In fact, important for the modern teacher are the following characteristics (European Commission, 2018): Critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, metacognitive skills, communication skills, creativity, and intercultural skills.

In recent years the need for long-term and well-organized educational programs has become more pressing than ever (Floyd, 2022). In this context, language teachers in bilingual/cross-cultural environments seek the establishment of an organized training policy (Cortina & Earl, 2020) in order to familiarize themselves with modern language teaching methods and enhance their teaching skills.

Indeed, the training of teachers who will participate in the educational system of Albania and teach the Greek language is challenging and fragmented, lacking a comprehensive framework as the issue of training teachers in Greek minority education in Albania has not been a major concern for educational policy planners (Barkas, 2015). Training has, until now, been primarily a personal matter for each teacher in the region, depending on their individual intention to keep up with developments in language teaching. Given the incomplete training of teachers in Greek minority education in Albania the undertaking of this research is deemed particularly essential.

Due to the fragmented teachers training in the Greek minority education in Albania, the implementation of the present research is deemed particularly necessary. Specifically, the systematic bibliographic research demonstrated the absence of studies related to the issue to be investigated in the field of teacher training for Greek minority education in Albania and a lack of research coverage of the subject of Greek language teaching in bilingual/intercultural learning environments was found, in a period of intense research effort in teacher training at an international level (Sorkos & Hajisoteriou, 2021).

In the international literature, some studies concerning the training of Greek language teachers in bilingual/intercultural environments were found (Anastasiadis & Manousou, 2016; Bikos, 2014; Bikos & Tzifopoulos, 2012), but even there it is observed research gap regarding the design, implementation and evaluation of training programs for Greek Language teachers in Greek minority education in Albania. It is therefore an original study applied to trainees who teach in a different educational context and that requires the adoption of different techniques and practices for teaching the Greek language in bilingual/intercultural environments in the country.

The present research aims to present a comprehensive proposal that includes the evaluation of training program for Greek language teachers within the Greek minority edu-

cation system of Albania. The ultimate goal is to introduce a comprehensive training framework for Greek language teachers within minority education system in Albania, utilizing the advantages and practical application possibilities offered by modern training models. Thus, pertinent questions are raised about the training offered to Greek language teachers working in bilingual/cross-cultural environments in Albania. Moreover, their training needs are examined in relation to theoretical aspects of language development and contemporary approaches and methods for teaching the Greek language. Furthermore, the contribution of the distance learning training program to the development of knowledge, skills, behaviors, values, and attitudes of teachers regarding the Greek language is assessed. The study aimed at investigating the effectiveness of the distance education training program in both synchronous and asynchronous digital learning environments as perceived by Greek Language teachers in the Greek Minority Education System of Albania.

The Context of Greek Language Education in Modern Albania

Formal Education

The education system in Albania consists of the nine-year basic education, which is compulsory for all students and is equivalent to the primary and secondary education provided in the Greek education system (Tigas, 2014). The next level of education is the tertiary level and includes two types of schools: the General Lyceum, which lasts for three years and the Vocational Lyceum which lasts for two years (first level of study), three (second level), four years (third study level), with the last level giving the possibility of admission to the Higher Educational Institutions of the country. Moreover included above the basic structure of the Albanian educational system is the Greek-language education of the Greek minority. Public minority schools operate in those areas traditionally inhabited by the Greek minority, under the auspices of the Albanian state, and more specifically in the areas of Argyrokastro, Delvino and Agioi Saranda (Rapti, 2014). The curriculum of minority schools, depending on the level, include the teaching of Greek as an independent language course, otherwise the program is conducted exclusively in Greek. Greek language education follows the mandatory nine-year education in which the teaching of the Greek language is an integral part, with a progressive reduction of hours in the last grades. Regarding secondary education, the Greek language is taught two hours a week in all higher-level schools located in the minority zone and attended by students of Greek origin. Apart from the public Greek-language minority schools in Albania, there are also private schools funded by the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education. These are the bilingual

school "Omiros" in Kortsa and the minority school "Omiros" in Himara (Sotiroudas et al., 2020).

Non-Formal Education

Students are also able to learn the Greek language through the private Greek language tutoring institutes which operate in both minority and non-minority areas. These respond to the needs of Greek language education from a public that varies according to their expectations but also their language skills and the level of their L1/L2 language.

METHOD

Based on the objectives of the study and in an effort to ensure a more complete and valid perspective of the problem and to achieve the collection of reliable data, four questionnaires were given to the trainees: a) a teachers' needs questionnaire, b) a teachers' expectations questionnaire, c) a final evaluation questionnaire, d) a follow up questionnaire. In this way, we tried to ensure a more complete and valid perspective of the issue under negotiation, contributing to a more comprehensive and complete assessment of the issue (Griva & Stamou, 2014).

Participants

The training program was tailored to the needs of 43 teachers employed in the Greek minority education in the areas of Argyrokastro, Delvino and Agioi Saranda of Albania (see table 1).

The application of the Addie model in the present training program

The training program was designed based on the blended learning model, combining both synchronous and asynchronous methods. By putting the trainees at the center, the ADDIE model shaped the ideal training environment so that all the content of the program can be adapted to their own needs and desires. This particular model allowed the researcher to design the training program in successive stages, taking into account the continuous evaluation of the course of the program (Dick & Carey, 2001). The stable structure offered by the specific model contributed to the creation of an effective work plan that will bring a desired result to the educational process. According to Branch (2009), the ADDIE educational design model adapts to the special characteristics and needs of each learner depending on the content, learning space and time of each individual. Taking into account the teachers needs and preferences, the modern approaches of language teaching and the principles of adult education, we created a more alternative training program based on: teachers' self action, teachers' self assessment, teachers' reflection on the training process.

The "Learnworlds" training platform

The selection criteria of the "LearnWorlds" digital platform for our training program were: a) its usability, b) its flexibility, c) its evolvability, d) its stability, e) its safe environment it offers and g) its interactivity, h) it platform's user-friendly interface. The design for training purposes, as well as its use in international literature (see Palaigerogiou & Papado-

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Trainees

Gender	Man		Woman					
	16.3%	7	83.7%	36				
Age	21-30		31-40		41-50		50+	
	7.0%	3	20.9%	9	46.5%	20	25.6%	11
Years of service	1-5		6-10		11-20		20+	
	11.6%	5	7.0%	3	34.9%	15	46.5%	20
Position in education	School Director		Teacher					
	16.3%	7	83.7%	36				
Undergraduate studies	Department of Greek Language, Literature and Greek Culture		Academy of Greek Studies		Faculty of Education Sciences		Other	
	69.8%	29	11.6%	5	16.3%	7	4.7%	2
Master's studies	Postgraduate		Other undergraduate degree		Ph.D.		Other	
	20.9%	9	9.3%	4	2.3%	1	2.3%	1

poulou, 2019; Papadopoulou & Palaigeorgiou, 2016), played a key role in its selection for the implementation of the present training program. "LearnWorlds" provides various services such as: interactive videos, gamified learning environment, content management, material repository, award and achievement system, communication and various other functions.

The digital training environment

The program was designed around ten thematic modules, including modern methods of teaching language skills and strategies, intercultural communication skills and strategies as well as language assessment. Every module was carried out through three stages:

- The first stage "Time to Begin!"
- The second stage " Put It into Action!" and
- The third stage "It's time to Create!"

The first stage: "Time to Begin!"

In the first stage, the trainees watched a video including the necessary information on the context of the module. The video gave information at a theoretical level but also useful practical applications for the implementation of all this information that they took at a theoretical level (Anastasiadis & Spantidakis, 2013). The ultimate goal was through the practical orientation activities to redefine the way and type of language course teaching through the most modern teaching and pedagogic methods.

The second stage: "Put It Into Action!"

In the second stage, the trainees were asked to carry out some closed type activities related to certain practices and the trainees got immediate feedback on their performance. In this second stage of each thematic educational module there were six categories of activities from which teachers received direct feedback, such as crosswords, multiple choice questions etc.

The third stage: "It's time to Create!"

In this stage, trainees were given the opportunity to design for their class a lesson plan or perform a creative activity which was uploaded to the platform. There were meaningful material-making processes, to critically explore the subject under study in authentic learning environments (Palloff & Pratt, 2013) through alternative ideas, information seeking, allowing their creative expression, just as the modernization of the language course is required.

Data analysis

Analysis of the questionnaire data

The data derived from the questionnaires were analyzed quantitatively, using SPSS software (26th edition) with which the frequencies obtained from the responses of the trainees were recorded. The processing of the data resulting from the answers of the participating teachers to the closed and "open" type questions was implemented at the level of inductive statistics. More specifically, using tools of descriptive statistics, the frequencies resulting from the answers of the teachers of the Greek minority education in Albania were recorded and the corresponding graphs were created. A thorough examination was conducted to explore the correlation between the independent categorical variables of the four questionnaires with respect to each sub-question-criterion of the questionnaire, which constitutes either a categorical or ordinal variable (on a five-point Likert Scale). The categorical variables of the questionnaire included the age groups of the respondents (21-30 years, 31-40 years, 41-50 years, and over 50 years), their years of working experience in education (1-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-20 years, and over 20 years), as well as their position (whether they are regular educators or school unit Directors), and a Chi-square test of independence was performed.

The teacher Needs Assessment Questionnaire

The teachers' needs assessment questionnaire was distributed before the planning of the training program, at a time when all the teachers of the Greek minority education in Albania were gathered in the area of the Department of Greek Language, Literature and Greek Culture, in a special event, dedicated to the World Day of the Greek Language, in the presence of the researcher. The questionnaire included 70 questions which were grouped into the following four thematic axes: a) Training Experience, b) Expectations from the Training Programs, c) Training Needs, d) Suggestions for Future Training Programs.

The teacher Expectation Questionnaire

The teacher expectation questionnaire was designed by the researchers with the purpose to identify the teachers' expectations toward a future training program that would be implemented in the region. It consisted of 16 closed-ended questions on a five-point Likert scale and 2 "open-ended" questions were also included in order to map the teachers' orientation in terms of those modules they wish to receive training on.

The Evaluation Questionnaire

The evaluation questionnaire administered to the trainees as part of the final evaluation of the training program consisted of 46 closed-ended questions and three "open-ended" questions which were included in the following eight thematic axes: a) General Assessment, b) The Training Material, c) The training Activities, d) The Trainer, e) Organizational Issues, f) Overall Evaluation of the training program g) Quality of the Training Program and h) Suggestions about future training.

The Follow up Questionnaire

The follow up questionnaire administered to the trainees six months after completing the training program taking into account the results of the final evaluation questionnaire as well as the research questions of the survey and consisted of a total of 12 closed-ended questions and 4 "open-ended" questions.

RESULTS

Results from the Need Assessment Questionnaire

The educational needs of the teachers regarding the cognitive subject

As for the theoretical issues related to the language development, the majority of the participants showed a strong interest in language development and learning strategies in bilingual environments (60.5%), a strong to very strong interest in strategies for enhancing students' reading and writing skills in the Greek language (39.5% and 39.5%, respectively), and a high interest in evaluating the language course (41.9%).

Results from the teacher expectation questionnaire

The expectations from the training program

The data concerning the demographic variables of the participants are the same as those in the first questionnaire. On Table 3, the details are presented concerning the responses related to the expectations of the respondents from the training program. Specifically, the majority of teachers express a very high expectation of gaining valuable knowledge for teaching the Greek language (74.4%) and they expect the program content to be characterized by its relevance to everyday teaching practices (86.0%).

Results from the evaluation questionnaire

Overall evaluation of the Training Program

On Table 4, the data concerning the overall evaluation of the training program are recorded. Specifically, the majority of trainees state that they were greatly helped to understand modern methods and teaching techniques for the Greek language (85.4%), to implement modern methods and teaching techniques (70.7%), to develop appropriate strategies for enhancing reading and writing skills in their classrooms (73.2%), as well as listening and speaking skills (73.2%), to develop lesson plans tailored to meet the specific needs of their students effectively (78.0%), to become familiar with new methods of assessing language lessons (75.6%) and to change their perspectives regarding their approach on teaching the language course (75.6%).

The Benefits of Participating in the Training Program

Table 2

Teachers' Responses Based on the Preference Level for Training in Communication and Language Strategies

Communication and language Strategies	a) Language learning strategies in bilingual environments		b) Reading and Writing strategies in the Greek language		c) Assessment of language skills and strategies	
	N	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
Very strong interest	26	60.5	17	39.5	17	39.5
Strong interest	11	25.6	17	39.5	18	41.9
Moderate interest	4	9.3	7	16.3	8	18.6
Low interest	2	4.7	2	4.7	0	0
No interest	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 3

Teachers' expectations regarding the acquisition of skills

Expectations of skill acquisition	a) Contribution to the acquisition of knowledge for teaching the Greek language		b) Providing ideas in developing activities	
	N	%	*N*	%
Extremely	32	74.4	37	86
Very much	6	14	6	14
Moderately	4	9.3	0	0
Slightly	1	2.3	0	0
Not at all	0	0	0	0
No response	0	0	0	0

Table 4

Teachers' responses regarding the Overall Evaluation of the training program

Overall Evaluation of the Training Program	a) understanding modern methods and teaching techniques for the Greek language		b) implementing modern methods and teaching techniques when teaching the Greek language		c) developing appropriate strategies for enhancing reading and writing skills in the classroom		d) developing appropriate strategies for listening and speaking skills		e) developing lesson plans tailored to meet the specific needs of the students effectively		f) becoming familiar with new methods of assessing language lessons		g) changing the perspective on the approach of teaching the language course	
	N	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	N	%
Extremely	35	85.4	29	70.7	30	73.2	30	73.2	32	78	31	75.6	31	75.6
Very much	5	12.2	9	22	10	24.4	10	24.4	7	17.1	9	22	10	24.4
Moderately	1	2.4	3	7.3	1	2.4	1	2.4	2	4.9	1	2.4	0	0
Slightly	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Not at all	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

The benefits that the participants believe they obtained through their participation in the training program are shown on Table 5. Specifically, trainees mention the improvement of their teaching skills as one of the benefits (36.6%), getting familiar with modern methods and techniques for teaching the Greek language (58.5%), implementation of modern teaching methods and techniques for teaching the Greek language (58.5%), improvement in organizing language lessons (12.2%), enhancement of language skills in the Greek language (12.2%), application of suitable strategies for enhancing reading and writing skills in the classroom (14.6%), getting familiar with teaching the Greek language using computers (14.6%), and strengthening their professional profile (17.1%).

Results from the Post-Feedback Evaluation Questionnaire

Overall Evaluation of the Training Program

On Table 6, the results concerning the overall evaluation of the training program are recorded. From the trainees who responded to these specific questions, 94.7% state that upon returning to school, they utilized the knowledge and skills acquired through the program. They found it easy to apply the new knowledge and skills in their classrooms. Moreover, they state that after the program, they implement contemporary methods and techniques for teaching the Greek language, as well as strategies for enhancing reading and writing skills, with greater ease. On the other hand, 5.3% of the trainees were not sure. All teachers (100%) state that after

the program, they apply appropriate listening and speaking strategies in their classrooms with greater ease.

Results of Inductive Statistics

Results from the questionnaire recording training needs based on inductive statistics

The independence tests regarding the questionnaire for identifying training needs, revealed the following correlations:

Differentiations based on years of working experience. Trainees with 1 to 5 years of working experience believe that they need greater training support from the Greek state, especially when compared to other trainees, particularly those with 6-10 years of experience. (p = 0.021 < 0.05).

Trainees teachers with 20+ years of experience, and secondarily those with 11-20 years of experience, believe that for the purposes of the training program, the content should be more closely related to daily educational practices, to a greater extent compared to trainees with 1-5 and 6-10 years of experience (p = 0.031 < 0.05).

Differentiations based on the age. Trainees aged 41-50 prefer the distance training programs to a greater extent compared to trainees aged 21-30 (p = 0.041 < 0.05). Trainees aged 50 and above express the need for more training support from the Greek state, in a higher percentage compared to trainees aged 41-50 (p = 0.001 < 0.05).

Results of the expectations scale based on inductive statistics

The independence tests concerning the expectations scale revealed the following correlations:

Differentiations based on years of working experience. Trainees with 11-20 years of experience as well as those with 20+ years of experience expect to a greater extent that the implementation pace of the training program is not exhausting, compared to trainees aged 21-30 (p = 0.027 < 0.05).

Differentiations based on the position they hold in education. Head teachers prioritize the incorporation of carefully chosen examples and applications in the effectiveness criteria, to a higher extend compared to other teachers (p = 0.045 < 0.05).

Table 5
Teachers' agreement on the benefits of the training program

Benefits of Participating in the Training Program	Yes		No	
	N	%	*N*	%
a) Enhancement of teaching skills	15	36.6	26	63.4
b) Getting familiar with modern methods and techniques for teaching the Greek language	24	58.5	17	41.5
c) Implementation of modern teaching methods and techniques for teaching the Greek language	24	58.5	17	41.5
d) Improvement in organizing language lessons	5	12.2	36	87.8
e) Enhancement of language skills in the Greek language	5	12.2	36	87.8
f) Application of suitable strategies for enhancing reading and writing skills in the classroom	6	14.6	35	85.4
g) Getting familiar with teaching the Greek language using ICT	6	14.6	35	85.4
h) Strengthening their professional profile	7	17.1	34	82.9

Table 6
Teachers' responses according to the agreement on the improvement of teaching methods

Evaluation of Teaching Methods Improvement	Yes		No		I'm not sure	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
a) After completing the program, incorporating contemporary methods and teaching techniques within my Greek language classroom becomes easier for me	36	94.7	0	0	2	5.3
b) After attending the program, I develop with greater ease in my classroom suitable strategies regarding Reading and Writing skills	36	94.7	0	0	2	5.3
c) After attending the program, I apply with greater ease in my classroom appropriate Listening and Speaking strategies	38	100	0	0	0	0

Differentiations based on the age. Trainees aged 41-50 expect to engage with new contemporary Greek language teaching methods through the training program, to a greater extent compared to trainees aged 21-30 ($p = 0.012 < 0.05$).

Results of the final evaluation questionnaire based on inductive statistics

Differentiations based on years of working experience. From the independence tests concerning the final evaluation questionnaire, only one statistically significant correlation emerged: In the benefits of the training program, trainees with 20+ years of experience include the strengthening of their professional profile to a greater extent compared to other trainees ($p = 0.027 < 0.05$).

Results of the follow up questionnaire based on inductive statistics

From the independence tests concerning the follow up questionnaire, no statistically significant correlation emerged.

DISCUSSION

In the present study, participants expressed strong dissatisfaction with the absence of an organized educational policy that aligns with their actual needs and contemporary educational developments. These results are consistent with previous research on Greek minority education in Albania (Barkas, 2015; Hemming et al., 2012; Vouri & Kapsalis, 2003) and provide an overview of the training landscape in the country. The vast majority of trainees identified the lack of training support as a significant issue. Conversely, international literature highlights that trainees often prioritize improvements in school infrastructure (Kanellopoulou & Darra, 2018; Sakkoulis & Vergidis, 2017). This finding underscores the importance of organizing training programs in Greek minority education in Albania to ensure that trainees are equipped with contemporary teaching methods for the Greek language.

Interestingly, differences in trainee opinions were observed based on years of experience. Those with fewer years of experience felt a greater need for training support from the Greek state compared to more experienced trainees. Conversely, more experienced trainees felt better prepared to teach the Greek language. This indicates a need for younger teachers to update their knowledge and stay informed about modern teaching methodologies within the evolving educational environment. Furthermore, most trainees expressed that they do not feel fully prepared to teach the Greek language and require more training in contemporary teaching methodologies, particularly in developing productive and receptive skills. Mede and Atay (2017) found that foreign language teachers also need training in teaching productive skills, whereas Vogt, Tsagari, and Spanoudi

(2020) reported that foreign language teachers did not feel the need for training in teaching receptive skills.

Specifically, teachers in Greek minority education in Albania expressed a desire for theoretical knowledge on developing productive and receptive skills, language development theories, and intercultural communication. Implementing a free distance learning training program that considers modern educational developments and promotes participant autonomy is necessary. These findings align with international literature (Konovalenko et al., 2021; Simonson et al., 2019), which supports distance learning as an innovative tool for contemporary teacher training programs.

Older trainees preferred distance training programs more than their less experienced counterparts. In contrast, younger trainees, familiar with information and communication technologies and recent graduates, favored training programs at the University of Argirokastro. This finding contrasts with other studies (Adam & Metljak, 2022) but emphasizes the necessity of distance learning programs in the region. Older trainees may see distance learning as a challenge (Kraiger et al., 2022), while younger trainees express positive views on university-based programs.

Teachers who participated in the training program specialized in contemporary methods for teaching Greek in modern educational contexts (Bouras, 2020). They focused on classroom management, lesson planning, and developing reading, writing, and communication strategies using new teaching methods. They also learned effective communication strategies and new methods for assessing language lessons. International literature (Bouras & Griva, 2022; Griva & Stamou, 2014; Kubanyiova & Crookes, 2016; Raud & Orehhova, 2022) emphasizes the importance of training language teachers in contemporary methods for bilingual/intercultural environments.

Most trainees expressed the need to update their undergraduate knowledge and implement innovative methods in Greek language teaching. Training programs that help analyze student needs are effective in transforming educators' thinking about lesson management (Ramírez-Montoya et al., 2021). The training program provided theoretical and practical knowledge to Greek language teachers in Albania, enabling them to meet new educational needs. The motivation to implement innovative methods changes trainee behavior (Charoensap-Kelly et al., 2016) and improves teaching skills, with the goal of applying theoretical knowledge in daily practice (Harris & Sass, 2011).

The key innovation of the training process was the implementation of a distance learning program in both synchronous and asynchronous digital environments. Trainees focused on the modern digital environment (Fengfeng et al., 2016), emphasizing its user-friendly interface and the positive experience it created. They highlighted the contribution

of teleconferencing to better communication and collaboration (Moumoutzis et al., 2018). Online meetings provided valuable feedback on educational materials and addressed questions during thematic sessions (Ramadani & Xhaferi, 2020). This created a comprehensive exchange of ideas among trainees, rather than just a simple exchange of plans. The contemporary training environment provided more stimuli, leading to complex experiences and a methodical approach to teaching Greek in bilingual/cross-cultural settings (Brevik et al., 2019). Trainees discussed and selected appropriate strategies and techniques for their classrooms (Arghode & Wang, 2016). This empowering digital environment helped redefine essential teaching elements and boosted trainees' confidence through an exploratory process (Sun et al., 2018).

In the context of this research, several limitations should be considered. The number of participants in the training program was limited due to the inherently small sample size, as the number of teachers in Greek minority education in Albania is restricted. In fact, the vast majority of Greek teachers in the region participated in this training program. Additionally, the absence of a control group poses a limitation; this arose because the program was piloted with only one group of teachers (the experimental group), preventing the observation of potential differences between groups. Lastly, the researcher had a dual role, also serving as the trainer for the program. To mitigate any potential bias from this dual role, anonymous questionnaires were administered at all stages of the program.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provided modern and innovative perspectives on distance learning programs designed for language teachers. The training program, implemented in both synchronous and asynchronous digital environments, was highly positively evaluated. The participating trainees actively engaged in creative digital activities for teaching the Greek language in bilingual contexts, effectively managing the continuous transitions educators face in the modern era. Information and communication technologies offer va-

riety and flexibility in learning methods and processes. The implementation of this training program thus serves as a foundation for developing and evaluating future training programs for language teachers in bilingual and multicultural environments. In a future study, it would be valuable to identify and record any changes in teaching approaches applied by the trained teachers after completing a training program. Additionally, evaluating existing institutions aimed at training language teachers in bilingual and multicultural environments would help outline a comprehensive picture of their functioning and highlight changes needed to align with modern educational requirements. Using quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection and analysis will create a comprehensive understanding of any changes occurring after the completion of these training programs for language teachers.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

None declared.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Spyridon Bouras: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Funding acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Resources; Software; Supervision; Validation; Visualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.

Panagiotis Barkas: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Funding acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Resources; Software; Validation; Visualization; Writing – original draft.

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