From Applying Theory to Theorising Practice: building small-t theories in Greek ELT [1]

Achilleas Kostoulas, Epirus Institute of Technology

This paper discusses critical reflection as a means for professional development. I argue that the prevailing model of teacher education encourages a counterproductive divide between theory and practice. I then advance the idea that theorising, i.e. structured reflection about practice, can provide more empowering alternative for developing teachers. I distinguish between grand theoretical narratives (Theories) and personally relevant understandings (theories), and I present a conceptual framework that can help to derive the latter. Finally, using the framework as a conceptual tool and instances of professional discourse as prompts, I present examples of how theories can be generated.

A few months ago, while interviewing a young learner, I chanced to ask her which aspects of her English language learning experience she found especially challenging. 'Essays', she replied, adding that it was 'simply impossible to learn them by heart'. Taken aback by this unexpected reply, I asked her to elaborate. It soon became clear that her teacher was in the habit of assigning readings, such as stories or letters of complaint, which the learners then had to memorise, so that they would be able to deal with the writing paper of a popular examination. My interviewee never paused to consider that this was bad teaching. She was only aware of her own 'failure'.

It is tempting to dismiss this odd story as yet another example of regrettable unprofessionalism, but I think that it has greater relevance to our professional development than is immediately apparent. I wish to suggest that there are parallels between this girl's learning experience and the initial teacher education that many of us have received, which relied on the memorisation of 'theory' and its subsequent 'application'; that there are similar parallels between this student's feelings and the disempowerment many teachers experience when confronted with the divide between what they were trained to do and what is relevant to their professional context; and that in both cases a better resolution might be reached by investing the individuals concerned with greater trust.

This paper aims to explore the implications of applying received knowledge uncritically, and to put forward an alternative way of relating theory and practice. I begin by discussing the Applied Science model of teacher education (Wallace, 1991, pp. 8-9), and argue that this model is limited as regards the preparation that trainee teachers are offered, and limiting as regards its impact on the teachers' professional life. In the second part of the paper, I make the case for theorising (Edge, 2011, pp. 79-97), a type of structured reflection on practice, as a

---

mode of professional development that can be implemented in place of, or in parallel to, immersion in Theory, and I put forward a conceptual framework (Kostoulas, in preparation) that can provide scaffolding for theorising. In the final part of the paper, I exemplify theorising, using instances of professional discourse (Φιτιλή, 2010) as prompts.

The Applied Science model

The Applied Science model developed as a reaction to the limitations of apprenticeship-based professional education. In the latter, trainee teachers might be placed under the tutelage of a master teacher or mentor, who would impart the distilled product of his or her accumulated experience, and who would also model appropriate forms of instruction (Stones & Morris, 1972). In the absence of formal mentor-mentee pairings, novice teachers would often draw on insights from their own schooling, or what Lortie (1975) termed the 'apprenticeship of observation'. As this model proved indefensible in the face of rapid advances in linguistics and educational psychology, a more 'scientific' alternative emerged.

In brief, the Applied Science model posits that the main component of language teacher education is a thorough grounding on linguistic and pedagogical theory, or –alternatively– what is broadly termed 'language and literature'. This theoretical component is usually supplemented with few practice-facing subjects, such as Applied Linguistics. The Applied Science model draws on the strengths of the empirical tradition, as well as a (possibly naive) belief that such 'technical rationality' (Schön, 1987) can provide guidance in all domains of social life. In Edge's view, it is a mode of teacher education that "respects the teachers' intellectual capacity" (2011, p. 15), and its 'scientific' grounding compares favourably to the 'mystical' approaches that preceded it (Stones & Morris, 1972).

The Applied Science model constitutes the dominant form of teacher development in Greece, at least in the field of ELT. In the curriculum of the Faculty of English Studies at the University of Athens, more than half the modules on offer are literature-based and, from the ones that remain, over two thirds involve theoretical linguistics (e.g. *Issues in English Syntax, Metaphor and Metaphoricity*). Applied Linguistics account for just five modules (e.g. *Applied Linguistics I, ELT Methods and Practices*), and there is only one practice-based module on offer (*Practice Teaching in TEFL*) (Table 1). A somewhat more balanced offer between theoretical and applied subjects is evidenced in the curriculum of the Aristotle University School of English Language and Literature, although the statistics may be skewed by the uneven distribution of compulsory and elective modules (Table 2). Much like in Athens, the number of practice-based modules is disproportionately small (two modules out of 61).

Table 1. Distribution of modules in the Language & Linguistics group of the Faculty of English Studies, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens[2]

Subject group	n	%
Theoretical Linguistics	21	72
Applied Linguistics	5	17
Practice-based	1	4
Other	2	7
Total	29	100

[2] Five translation modules have been omitted from this calculation to render results comparable to those of the University of Thessaloniki, where translation is taught by a dedicated group.

Table 2. Distribution of modules in the Linguistics group of the School of English Language & Literature, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

Subject group	n	%
Theoretical Linguistics	35	57
Applied Linguistics	21	35
Practice-based	2	3
Other	3	5
Total	61	100

Problems with the Applied Science model

Despite its prevalence, the Applied Science model has come under sustained attack over the years (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Clarke, 1994; Edge, 2011; Wallace, 1991). Because it artificially segments the professional experience into theory and practice, it is flawed in at least three regards.

Firstly, in the Applied Science model, teacher education can only take place in formal training programmes, where experts impart knowledge onto the trainees. Just as initial teacher education takes place exclusively in tertiary institutions, continuing professional development is only envisaged in the form of workshops, lectures or postgraduate courses, which tend to be infrequent or otherwise impractical. By contrast, the actual classrooms where the majority of teachers spend most of their professional lives are treated as irrelevant to teacher education, except as places where to apply the newly-acquired knowledge. I would suggest that in parallel to such structured learning events that take place *outside* practice, there is a need for teachers to develop *through* practice.

Secondly, the rigid division between those who 'produce knowledge' and those that 'consume' it seems to generate mutual suspicion and animosity. In order for theory to interface with ongoing research and scholarship, it needs to draw on their conceptual tools and meta-language, neither of which are immediately useful to teaching practice, and both of which render it inaccessible to practitioners. Moreover, in order to be universally valid, pedagogical theory needs to be abstract; but when thus formulated it cannot be immediately applicable to any specific context. As a result, academics tend to treat practice as theoretically impoverished and incoherent, and teachers tend to regard the academe as unrelated to day-to-day teaching. It would seem that theory and practice need to interface with each other more usefully than is possible through the Applied Science model.

Thirdly, and perhaps most dangerously, the strong division of labour that underpins the Applied Science model has proved to be disempowering for teachers. Its fundamental premise is that knowledge is generated by researchers and then, through the mediation of lecturers, it is conveyed to teachers who will finally impart it to their learners. Consequently, in our school system (and others), teachers tend to be confined to the technical task of efficiently delivering a pre-defined syllabus. Not only does this division of labour devalorise the teachers' expertise, but it has also been claimed to conceal and legitimise asymmetrical power structures in the social world (Phillipson, 1992). If that is the case, it seems imperative that teachers be empowered with critical skills through which to re-interpret the curriculum demands, and there is good reason to believe that the Applied Science model is decidedly unsuited to providing such critical skills.

Theorising as professional development

Having discussed some of the limitations and pitfalls of the Applied Science model, I would now like to move on to a more empowering alternative: theorising (from and about) practice. I will first lay out a broad-strokes description of what theorising involves, and then I will describe a conceptual framework that can be used to facilitate theorising.

Theorising and small-t theories

Whereas the Applied Science model relies on the top-down implementation of outside knowledge, theorising is a bottom-up process of deriving personal understanding from practice. Theorising can be defined as a rigorous and structured process of reflection that uses input from sources such as, indicatively, everyday teaching, professional discussions, readings, observations and experimentations. It is a cyclical process that involves deliberately, even provocatively, questioning the validity of a hitherto uncontroversial aspect of practice (*problematising*), approaching it from alternative perspectives (*interrogating*), constructing a set of beliefs that accounts for the phenomenon in question (*hypothesizing*), and –finally– enhancing the coherence of the nascent theory by making linkages between the emergent beliefs (*integrating*), before moving on to problematising something different in light of our new insights.
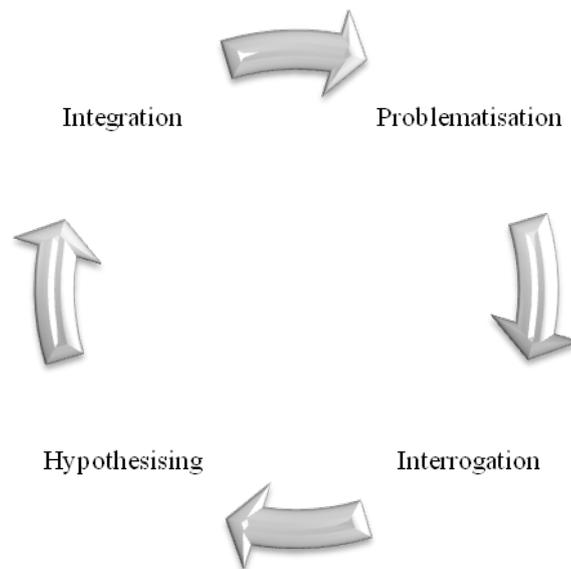

Figure 1 - Theorising as process

The product of theorising is a personal theory, or "an articulation of the best understanding thus far available […] as to why things are the way they are" (Edge, 2008, p. 653). I use the term (small-t) theory to distinguish this type of understanding from (capital-T) Theory as a 'school of thought' (Stern, 1983, p. 26). What distinguishes theories from their grander counterparts is their reflexive nature and their firm grounding on the individual experience.

In saying that small-t theories are reflexive, I mean that they should explicitly acknowledge the unique role of the individual that theorises, i.e. they need to account for questions like the following (Edge, 2011, p. 47):

- What difference does it make to me that I have reached this, rather than a different, theory?

- What difference does it make that I, rather than someone else, have reached this theory?

In order to be grounded on individual experience, the nascent theory brings into sharp focus what Kumaravadivelu (2003) referred to as particularity, practicality and possibility. Particularity involves understanding that there cannot be a single universally applicable Theory in the form of principles or 'best practices'; it is therefore incumbent on teachers to theorise appropriately to their context. Practicality entails accepting the primacy of situated teaching over abstract information as a source of context-specific knowledge. Possibility implies acknowledging that our theory, and the practices that are based on it, are constrained by existing conditions, but can also challenge them.

A conceptual framework

In this section, I will describe a conceptual framework that can be used to facilitate theorising. This framework has been empirically derived with a view to understanding the collective behaviour of entities such as schools in Greece (Kostoulas, 2011), but I would like to submit that it can also facilitate individual professional development, by helping to identify where theorising might prove most fruitful, and by scaffolding this reflective process.

The most prominent feature of the framework is the three major paradigms (or Theories) that appear to co-exist in Greek ELT praxis, and which have been termed the transmissive, communicative and critical paradigms.

The *transmissive paradigm* encompasses a broad swath of teaching beliefs and practices, ranging from pre-theoretical traditional teaching to 'scientific' breakthroughs such as the oral approach and audiolingualism. The fundamental premise shared by these diverse positions is that linguistic competence can be reduced to a finite amount of knowledge, and that teaching consists of transmitting this knowledge to the learners. Transmissive teaching provides the theoretical legitimisation for the accuracy ethos that typifies Greek education, the prevalence of testing as a means of certifying that the requisite knowledge has been efficiently transmitted, and the salience of vocabulary and grammar teaching.
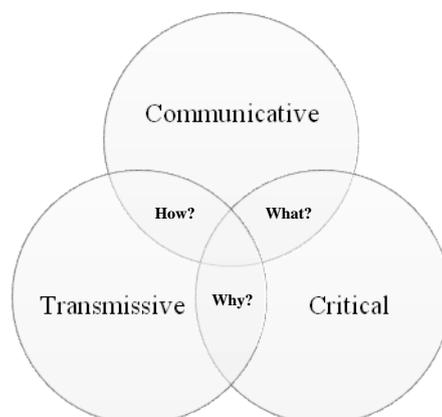

Figure 2 Paradigms constraining Greek ELT (based on Kostoulas 2011b)

Under the term *communicative paradigm*, I have subsumed various methods and approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching or Task-Based Learning. These positions are united by the priority assigned to communicative competence, the belief in the learning group

5

ideal and the preference for direct teaching of language through communicative tasks. Some recognisable communicative traces in Greek ELT include activities that involve group work and collaborative projects, the division of many syllabuses into skill-specific (i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing) strands, and the imperative to pedagogically exploit genuine materials, preferably those available online.

The *critical paradigm* theoretically encodes a post-modern demand to question the foundational assumptions of ELT, and is presently more visible in the literature than in practice. On the linguistic front, it calls for rethinking the role of local varieties (Kachru, 1985) and transnational uses (Jenkins, 2000; Seidlhofer, 2001) of English. In terms of pedagogical premises, it challenges the assumption that educational models that were developed in mainstream Anglo-Saxon education can be non-problematically transferred to other socio-cultural contexts (Bax, 2003; Holliday, 2005). Politically, it raises questions about the role of English in local linguistic ecologies, and the implications of the global spread of English (Edge, 2006; Phillipson, 1992).

Of special interest to theorising are the areas of overlap among the paradigms. These areas demonstrate the relevance of particularity and practicality, since the different paradigms appear to suggest conflicting, and sometimes incompatible answers to salient questions. One such question involves the content of instruction (*What English should be taught?*), another refers to the means used to teach English (*How should English be taught?*) and a final one involves the ends of foreign language learning (*Why should English be taught?*) (cf. Kostoulas, 2010). Such questions also bring into prominence the concept of possibility, by pointing out areas where personal understandings can develop to supplement overarching Theories. For all these reasons, I would suggest that these areas of overlap constitute the natural starting points for theorising.

Building a small-t theory

In the final part of this paper, I will illustrate this process of theorising by referring to a genuine piece of discourse about the coursebooks that were recently introduced in primary schools (Φιτιλή, 2010). My motives for selecting this particular text are dual: Firstly, I was struck by the rhetorical power of the discourse, and the passion that this revealed for teaching. At the same time, I was conscious that the author's critique, while cogent, fell short of issues that could –in my view– be usefully addressed. On account of its earnest, if somewhat pre-theoretical, problematisation, I feel that this text constitutes an appealing choice as a prompt for theorising.

Before moving onto the discussion of the text, there are two points that need to be made, lest my intentions are misunderstood. Firstly, the analysis that follows is in no way intended as a criticism of the author's position: rather it is used to illustrate how such thinking can be systematised and extended into developing a more comprehensive theory that has even more explanatory power and pedagogical value. Secondly, the extracts that I have chosen to highlight and the directions in which my thinking will develop are nothing more than personal choices, and as such they do not have any priority over the readers' reactions, except maybe through power of persuasion.

Having made these points, I will draw on the paper to problematise and interrogate the content of the books, and -following that- the methods and ends of instruction.

What?

When it comes to the content of the books, the author raises several objections, ranging from the number of vocabulary items to the topics of the reading passages. As my purpose is merely to offer an example of theorising, rather than to provide commentary on all aspects of her thinking, I will engage only with those points that regard pronunciation training. In her words:

- *Άλλο τραγελαφικό μειονέκτημα του βιβλίου είναι η προφορά των πρωταγωνιστών στα περισσότερα κείμενα.* [The heroes' accent in most texts is another preposterous disadvantage of the book]

- *Τα listenings είναι άλλη πληγή του βιβλίου. Η άρθρωση των πρωταγωνιστών είναι κάκιστη.* [The listening tasks are another sore of the book. The heroes' accent is appalling]

- *Τα βιβλία της ΣΤ' πάσχουν από* [...] *ακόμα πιο απαράδεκτης προφοράς των κειμένων* [sic] [The sixth form books suffer from … the texts' even more unacceptable accents]

In terms of the framework proposed in the previous section, these views are suggestive of a transmissive orientation to teaching. It is implicitly suggested that correctness is defined by reference to a small number of 'acceptable' norms (presumably Received Pronunciation and General American), which need to be accurately reproduced, or else pedagogy is in some way problematic. The question that is validly asked can be summarized as: do these materials cater to our needs for an accurate pronunciation model?

Despite its prevalence, this viewpoint is by no means uncontroversial. In the Communicative Tradition, the ability to convey information efficiently is prioritized over accuracy (particularly in pronunciation). So if one were to approach the same issue from a communicative perspective, one would have to ask: to what extent do the deviant pronunciations in the coursebooks compromise the learners' ability to develop communicative competence?

From a critical perspective, a number of questions might also be raised with regard to what constitutes an 'acceptable' pronunciation, and who it is defined by. The view that some historical varieties of English should enjoy priority over emerging variants, or World Englishes (Prator, 1968; Quirk, 1990) has been famously discredited (Kachru, 1991), and ongoing linguistic research keeps challenging our perceptions of 'correctness' (Breiteneder, 2009; Jenkins, 2000). From this it follows that in addition to passing judgment on the 'acceptability' of pronunciation standards in the coursebooks, one might also take care to avoid the pitfalls of discriminating against linguistic groups (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988).

How?

The second area of tension in the conceptual framework focuses on the methods and instruments used to provide language instruction. As before, the author's sweeping criticism need not be considered in its entirety, but some of the points which seem theoretically intriguing include the following:

- *Ο μαθητής δεν μπορεί να εποπτεύσει την γραμματική που διδάσκεται αφού δεν υπάρχει κάποιος αναλυτικός πίνακας δίπλα στα κείμενα.* [The learners cannot survey the grammar that is being taught because there is no analytical table beside the texts]

- *Τα περισσότερα κείμενα είναι ανούσια, ανέμπνευστα, άχαρα και συνεπώς δεν δημιουργούν χαρά στους μαθητές μας.* [Most texts are meaningless, uninspired, tasteless and therefore create no joy to our students]

- *Τα κείμενα είναι δυσνόητα και τεχνοκρατικά και δεν υπάρχει ένα τραγουδάκι, ένα παιχνιδάκι, κάτι τέλος πάντων που να «σπάει» την αφόρητη πλήξη που αναδίδουν.* [The texts are dense and technocratic and there is no song, game, something which can 'break' the unbearable monotony they give off]

It is indeed hard not to sympathize with the author's frustration at having to use materials that are unsuited to her needs. But having made that point, one cannot help noticing, in the author's rhetorical choices, that the learners are presented as passive agents who have no choice on what they prefer to learn, or indeed on what they might find interesting. These choices, it appears, are made for them by the teacher, whose authority on the matter is unquestioned. In this case also, I would suggest that the criticism expressed herein constitutes an answer to the transmissivist question: do these materials conform to my expectations as a language teaching expert?

To add depth to such problematisation, one might want to reflect on the possibilities and limitations of alternative paradigms. Drawing on the communicative paradigm, it might be helpful to differentiate between text and task, and to explore how creative tasks can be exploited to compensate for uninspiring texts. Such thinking could hopefully lead to a comparative appraisal of transmissive and communicative pedagogy, highlighting their respective affordances and appropriateness to context.

Continuing the process of theorising from a critical standpoint, one might also fruitfully ask: why was each particular text included in the syllabus, and how will learners benefit from it? Who is to select the texts that will be used in class: the book authors, the teachers or the students? Through what criteria can such a choice be made?

Why?
The final point that I would like to raise relates to the purpose of instruction in the foreign language. In her review, the author claims, with discernible authority, that:

- *Όσοι οραματίζονται κρατικά πιστοποιητικά γλωσσομάθειας με αυτά τα βιβλία, είναι μακρυά νυχτωμένοι!* [Those who dreamt up the state language certification with these books are seriously deluded!]

Prompted by such a bold assertion, readers might want to consider exactly which aspects of the courseware are at dissonance with the implicit aim of certification, how important this lack of coherence is, and how it might be resolved.

In parallel to the above, theorising might revolve around the relative priority of certification and communication, about the importance of developing intercultural competences, about the possibility of promoting tolerance and empathy through English. Such theorising could generate a more holistic appraisal of the coursebooks in question, and perhaps alert us to additional disconnects between the materials at hand and the goals we consider important.

It hardly needs stating that teaching English is a political act that is motivated by specific agendas and which entails observable results (Pennycook, 1994). It may therefore be useful, from a political perspective, to critically interrogate whose agendas are furthered by language

policies such as the promotion of state certification, or by the imposition of a single coursebook across the country, and whether such policies ultimately benefit the learners with whose education we have been entrusted.

Conclusion

This paper began by discussing the 'Applied Science' model of teacher education and what I perceive as some of its more problematic aspects. I then argued for the bottom-up generation of personal theories that are contextually-sensitive and responsive to the immediate demands of practice, as an alternative or a supplement to the prevailing top-down model. To facilitate this process of theorizing, I described a conceptual framework of ELT which integrates a number of Theories while providing space for the emergence of personal theory.

In the last section of the paper, I used a typical example of teacher discourse as a prompt to illustrate the two initial steps of the theorising process, namely problematisation and interrogation. I am aware that the process appears incomplete without a demonstration of hypothesising and integration, but I feel that if I were to attempt this demonstration, the resulting theory would be constrained by my personal experiences and preferences, and its resonance would inevitably be private. Instead, I would like to invite readers to continue this process of reflection on their own, and work individually towards the formulation of theories that are coherent, persuasive and – above all – personally relevant.

Works Cited

Argyris, C., & Schön, D. A. (1974). *Theory in practice: increasing professional effectiveness*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bax, S. (2003). The end of CLT: a context approach to language teaching. *ELT Journal*, 57(3), 278-287.

Breiteneder, A. (2009). English as a lingua franca in Europe: an empirical perspective. *World Englishes*, 28(2), 256-269.

Clarke, M. A. (1994). The disfunctions of the theory / practice discourse. *TESOL Quarterly*, 28(1), 385-389.

Edge, J. (2008). Interested theory and theorising as goal: a reader responds to "Symposium: theory in TESOL". *TESOL Quarterly*, 42, 653-654.

Edge, J. (2011). *The reflexive teacher educator in TESOL: Roots and wings*. Oxon: Routledge.

Edge, J. (Ed.). (2006). *(Re-)locating TESOL in an age of empire*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Holliday, A. (2005). *The struggle to teach English as an international language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jenkins, J. (2000). *The phonology of English as an international language: new models, new norms, new goals*. Oxford: OUP.

Kachru, B. B. (1985). Standards, codification and socio-linguistic realism: the English language in the outer circle. In R. Quirk & H. G. Widdowson (Eds.), *English in the world: teaching and learning the language and literatures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kachru, B. B. (1991). Liberation linguistics and the Quirk concern. *English Today*, 7(01), 3-13.

Kostoulas, A. (2010). Between paradigms: a case study of a language school in Greece. In P. Georgogiannis & V. Baros (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 13th International Conference on Intercultural Education* (Vol. 2, pp. 400-411). Alexandroupolis, Greece: University of Patras Research Centre for Intercultural Education.

Kostoulas, A. (2011). Places for Pedagogy, Spaces for Innovation: the emergence of eclectic practice in ELT. Paper presented at the *New dynamics of language learning* International Conference, Jyväskylä, Finland, June 2011.

Kostoulas, A. (in preparation). Using a complexity perspective to investigate English Language Teaching in Greece: a case study (Working title). PhD Thesis, The University of Manchester, Manchester.

Kumaravadivelu, B. (2003). *Beyond methods: macrostrategies for language teaching*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Lortie, D. (1975). *Schoolteacher: a sociological study*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Pennycook, A. (1994). *The cultural politics of English as an international language*. London: Longman.

Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Prator, C. H. (1968). The British heresy in TESL. In J. A. Fishman, C. Ferguson & J. Des Gupta (Eds.), *Language problems in developing nations* (pp. 459-476). New York: Wiley.

Quirk, R. (1990). Language varieties and standard language. *English Today*, 21, 3-10.

Schön, D. A. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner: toward a new design for teaching and learning in the professions*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Seidlhofer, B. (2001). Closing a conceptual gap: the case for the description of English as a lingua franca. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 11(2), 133-158.

Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (1988). Multilingualism and the education of minority children. In T. Skutnabb-Kangas & J. Cummins (Eds.), *Minority education: from shame to struggle* (pp. 9-44). Clavendon: Multilingual Matters.

Stern, H. H. (1983). *Fundamental concepts of language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stones, E., & Morris, S. (1972). *Teaching practice: problems and perspectives*. London: Meuthen.

Wallace, M. J. (1991). *Training foreign language teachers: a reflective approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Φιτιλή, Ε. (2010). Αποτίμηση των νέων βιβλίων Αγγλικής των τάξεων Δ΄, Ε΄ και ΣΤ΄ του Δημοτικού. Retrieved 30/7/2011, from http://m.alfavita.gr/artro.php?id=16045, http://www.pde.gr/index.php?topic=15049.60.