

Research Article

Teaching Greek: from school to university via fifteenth century Florence

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Abstract

The scene is Florence, Italy in 1493. The scholar and teacher Guarino of Favera is holding a series of classes for beginners in the Greek language. Few people know Greek since materials for learning it are few. We have an account of his method by Girolamo Amaseo, one of his pupils. Amaseo is one of 16 students whose ages range from youths to a 50-year old poet, and Guarino is teaching them some Iliad, Odyssey and Aristophanes each day.

Primo sententiam lectionis paucis et dilucide eleganterque colligit; post interpretationem primam, verborum et nominum inflexionem, si duriuscula est, reperit; etimologiam non tacet et figuras reliquas. Secundo eam ipsam lectionem percurrit et, ne quae prius dixerat obliviscamur confirmat, examinatque nos omnes et, post ipsam statim lectionem, aliquis e numero nostro eam exponit. Cogimur declinare, nec displicet: omnia enim studia suam habet infanciam.

First, he elegantly and lucidly expresses the meaning of the text in a few words. After the first translation, if the case of the verbs and nouns is a little difficult, he clarifies it. He does not neglect etymology or the other figures of speech. Second, he goes on through the same text and, so that we do not forget what he has just said, he reinforces it, examines us all and immediately after the reading of the text, one of us expounds it. We are required to decline the nouns, and this is not a chore: every study has its infancy. (Botley, 2010)

Keywords: Ancient Greek pedagogy, secondary school, university, Active Greek

Introduction

Guarino was working in Greek and Latin, rather than Greek and English, and with students who were fluent Latin speakers. As I read Amaseo's account, it seemed to me that the method could be considered in terms of modelling by an expert and retrieval of information by the students from their memory. I wondered whether a modified version might be effective for teaching in the 21st century. This article is an account of my experience of trying a different approach to reading three texts on the JACT Greek summer school at Bryanston in 2022.¹ It describes the techniques I used, the rationale for them, the benefits I saw, and the views of the students themselves.

My techniques were based on recent research and good practice in teaching. Rosenshine and his 'principles of instruction' have been given a lot of attention by schools in recent years (Rosenshine, 2012). His principles are based on extensive research in three main areas: cognitive science, classroom practices of master teachers, and cognitive support to help students learn complex tasks. In practice this means a focus on modelling, questioning, reviewing, and practising. These principles apply across the board in a teaching/learning environment, not just to language teaching. There is nothing that is particularly revolutionary about them and in many

respects the practices have long been a feature of good teaching, but they are evidence-based and easy to put into practice. I have also taken account of classics-specific research, but the little research that that has been published focuses on Latin rather than Greek.

The JACT Greek summer school

I had a group of 11 students with 32 hours of classroom time over a period of two weeks. The students in the group had all taken A level Greek and all but one had A level Latin as well. Most were between school and university. I was interested in exploring how I might help facilitate their fluency in reading over the two weeks, in a way that would help their transition between school and university. At A level, students study two relatively short texts in great detail, learning how to comment on the content and style. They are also required to prepare for unseen or 'at sight' translation in two specified authors.

Students who are at this level on the JACT summer school read three texts: Homer, a prose author and a verse author. The usual format for each session is for students to prepare some text in advance, using a wordlist (provided), a lexicon and a modern commentary. Most students make significant progress over the duration of the summer school. This approach is not, however, without its problems: my experience is that some students often get stuck in their preparation and prepare very little; while others take time to feel comfortable in being put on the spot to make a contribution, especially when they are not sure whether they

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understand what the passage means. Despite the best efforts of the teacher, this method may result in one or two students dominating the class in the teacher's attempt to promote some sense of forward movement.

My first step was to talk to the Course Director and Director of Studies of the summer school to check that they were happy for me to try out some different methods and publish an article based on the experience. I obtained informed consent from the students in accordance with the British Educational Research Guidelines (BERA, 2018). I then asked the students to fill in three brief questionnaires over the fortnight consisting of a handful of open-ended questions, inviting narrative responses:

- at the start, to see what approaches they had been used to in reading texts.
- halfway through, to ascertain their interim thoughts and enable me to refine my methods.
- at the end, to elicit their views on various aspects of the experience.

This article is based on the questionnaire they completed at the end of the course.

Approach and methods

The principles underlying the approach of Guarino (overview, modelling, recall and questioning) were my starting point. Rather than the usual approach to texts of getting the students to prepare a translation in advance, I decided to use a 'post-paration' (as opposed to preparation) model where I would model the passage and they would go over it again after the session. To avoid sessions feeling too teacher-led, my modelling was interactive where possible with lots of questions and answers.

I also decided to use five other techniques which I have found very effective when using an oral approach to teach Latin. I describe them and the rationale for them in the following paragraphs.

1. Reading out loud

I read out the text in small sections of a few lines before I started to talk through how to approach the Greek. I was careful to use small pauses to indicate phrases and clauses and good intonation to try to convey meaning. Sometimes I explained why a clause had ended, or not. I wanted to model the thought-process of an expert in the hope that the students could begin to approach the Greek in the same way. The students also read out frequently to help them see sentence structure or to consolidate what we had just been through. At the start of each session, I got them to read the text from the previous session out loud to help me judge how effective their post-paration had been.

2. Left-to-right reading

I moved strictly from left to right in going through the text. There was no 'hunting for the verb', but instead I showed the students how to take into account information in the clause so far, think about expectations, and live with uncertainties. I showed them how to close each uncertainty down at the first opportunity. Often, my explicit help was limited to giving vocabulary, but I helped students see the thought as it emerged in the order of the Greek, applying cases and other grammatical information. Hoyos (2008) suggests looking at sentence structure as Latin and not as coded English. More recently Russell (2018) has detailed the literature and described a sequence of four lessons to a Latin class of 14-year-olds.

3. Techniques for enlarging vocabulary

Vocabulary is at the core of a language. The way in which information is stored in the long-term memory (LTM) is key. It seems that the arrangement of information and connections made with existing items of knowledge are important in making new information accessible when needed and keeping it for the longer term. As Carlon says:

Though not at all well understood, duration of retention seems to depend on how many links are made between the new entry when it arrives and items already present in LTM, as well as its regular retrieval and reactivation (Carlon, 2016).

Based on my experience of teaching Latin using extensive spoken Latin (Letchford, 2021) I used synonyms, antonyms, cognate words, English derivations and Latin words of equivalent meaning. I introduced the idea of vowel change between two consonants ('sing-sang-sung') and zero-grade stems, where the vowel drops out completely. I told them that these are techniques effective in building up a wider Greek vocabulary as an additional method to the traditional learning lists of words. I also worked with groups of words by meaning, for example Homeric words connected with fate and destiny, or words relating to the family. We also considered the range of meanings of individual words. *The Cambridge Greek Lexicon* was very useful in understanding the range of meanings with its arrangement of entries according to meaning rather than the traditional chronological and grammatical criteria of the *Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* of Liddell and Scott. By these means, we began not only to widen vocabulary but to situate words within a range of meanings and in relation to other words already known. The one thing we did not do was to have lists of vocabulary to learn.

4. Quizzes

To give the students the opportunity to show themselves how much they had taken in and to motivate them to post-pare carefully, I gave them a quiz at the start of each class of around ten written questions on a variety of matters – either words or phrases we had discussed as we went through the text or similar examples on which they could apply the same principles. Each quiz involved a variety of questions, such as manipulation of Greek words (tenses, cases) or synonyms and antonyms, discussion of expectations associated with particular words, or rewriting constructions. This was a low-stakes test or as I described it 'a test that isn't a test'. We went through the answers straight away (with them saying/sub-vocalising the answers) so that they had instant feedback. They could use the quizzes to assess their progress, but I never asked to see the results of these. In addition to these frequent quizzes, I gave them two formal tests, halfway through and at the end of the course, so that I could check their understanding and assess their progress.

5. Subvocalisation

I had suggested to the students that repeating new information or saying answers quietly to themselves might help them assimilate material. It could be particularly beneficial to the quieter students who knew the answer but did not feel confident. I was conscious of the disruption that students had been through in 2020 and 2021 with lockdowns and the anxiety they might have in an unfamiliar environment. I also suspected that the act of forming the words and moving throat and mouth muscles might help establish material

better in the long-term memory (just as visualisation with pictures can be a very effective tool in memorisation).

Texts and challenges

The texts that we read provided different challenges. In Homer's *Iliad* 6, there is a significant amount of unfamiliar vocabulary (even though the students had all read several hundred lines of Homer previously) and non-Attic grammatical forms to deal with. The syntactical structure is straightforward with a preference for building up parallel rather than subordinate clauses.

Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* uses Greek that is much denser, more poetic and allusive than Homer's. Words have a wider range of possible meanings and there are similes and metaphors to be negotiated. The arrangement of clauses can be complex: word order is less predictable and words often have to be supplied in parallel clauses. Setting out the point we were about to read helped in understanding how the Greek was expressed. I found myself quite often asking 'So what is this character saying?' because the Greek was so idiomatic.

Plato's *Apology*, the last text to be read, has many subordinate clauses and a higher number of constructions to be negotiated. For this, I found it important to give an overview of context and proceed strictly from left to right. By this stage, the students were often happier to work in complete phrases.

Findings and discussions

The initial and interim feedback was helpful in guiding my approach and making sure that it was suitable for the students. The results of the questionnaire at the end of the course are set out and analysed in the rest of this account. They are split into comments on the post-paration approach and on specific techniques in the class to promote acquisition. I quote extensively from the comments the students made.

Post-paration

My first question was 'How did you find the post-paration approach generally?'

A few reservations were expressed: one student would like to have gone faster; another would like to have gone slower so they could make better notes. Another commented that it was possible to lose concentration. Of course, these reservations could equally well arise under the more traditional model of preparation in advance and translation in class. One student reported they 'would have liked more high-stake tests and rigorous grammar/vocabulary tests' but this comment was an outlier. On the other hand, a couple of students commented that having less stress helped them to learn more.

Overall, though, the students reported enthusiasm for the approach generally, and they saw distinct benefits accruing:

- 'I have found that a lot of vocabulary and grammar is sticking better in my head than previous methods I have used.'
- 'Very helpful for me as there were grammar points I would not have got preparing myself.'
- 'I like post-paration as it allows a more thorough consideration of the text.'
- 'The teacher-led translations left to right has allowed me to understand the language in a more natural sense as the Greeks would have.'
- 'I like the fact that it is less stressful than more typical learning methods.'

- 'At the start it was particularly helpful, allowing me to feel my way back in. I suppose it's a testament to its success that I didn't feel I needed it by the time we hit Plato. I could read it (more or less).' (This student had spent a year working abroad and had not read any Greek during that time).

Techniques to promote acquisition

The second overall question looked more at specific activities. 'We used specific techniques to promote acquisition of the language. Which ones were helpful, which ones less so?' I then reminded them of the five techniques discussed above.

Reading out loud

Overall, students' responses about reading aloud provided evidence that they had found it helpful. About half of them commented that reading in Greek as a class prior to going through the text in detail had been less helpful. By contrast, when I read beforehand, showing clauses and meaning by intonation, this was liked much better (seven commented positively), with one finding it 'VERY VERY helpful'. Eight found that reading through in chorus after reading left-to-right was beneficial:

- 'Helpful and fun.'
- 'This was very helpful to consolidate knowledge.'
- 'Very useful as it allowed me to absorb the text holistically and from a more literary standpoint, to appreciate it as a work of literature.'

I also asked them their views on reading a short passage aloud to the rest of the class individually after post-paration at the start of the next class, a practice I had quickly abandoned because they had found it difficult. In our discussions they said that they had to devote most of their working memory to the task of deciphering the words to be heard publicly, because they did not have sufficient automaticity of processing sound from the printed page. This meant that they did not have the capacity to think about the meaning at the same time. I moved to a choral reading together which was easier for them. Their comments suggested that this could be a good technique if students have more practice in reading Greek aloud:

- 'I did enjoy it myself.'
- 'Ought to be helpful – more time between lessons may have resolved difficulties.'
- 'I found this pretty good, but the class was perhaps too large, and we read too small sections to get used to reading out loud.'
- 'I struggled with this because I had never really read Greek aloud before, but after some practice it became slightly easier and an interesting way to capture the meaning of speeches.'

One student wrote a more extended comment on reading aloud: 'I really enjoyed reading the Greek aloud. I found it a distinctive and valuable part of this course. Having the text read through was helpful but so was reading out individually or as a group. I think the method you used in the first few days would have been quite successful if it had persisted (at least, I enjoyed it).'

Overall, I conclude that the focus on reading Greek aloud was very useful in helping the students to see Greek as a (once-living) language. It helped promote thinking about logical structure and, when reading occurred after going through the text in detail, was useful in terms of recall and enabling the students to identify which parts needed more attention in post-preparation. If they had been more used to reading out loud before the course, post-paration

individual reading would have been an excellent tool for me to check on their progress.

Left-to-right reading

I explained the rationale for this in the first class and we used it throughout the fortnight. From my perspective, it worked very well for the Homer. It was trickier for the Sophocles because poetic vocabulary usage caused a burden on cognitive processing. By the time we read the Plato, the students could often deal in phrases and clauses rather than word by word: I think that the students had begun to internalise the method.

Eight students commented very positively, none adversely. For example:

- ‘Interesting technique – I enjoyed it.’
- ‘This is useful and speeds up translation.’
- ‘Brilliant – particularly at first.’
- ‘Helpful. Better than Subject Object Verb (more natural and easier?).’

Techniques for enlarging vocabulary

The students were vocal in their appreciation of the various methods that we used to help fix new vocabulary in long-term memory by relating it to existing knowledge:

- ‘I found all of these methods very helpful and think that they are better for making me remember vocab/grammar than memorising information regularly.’
- ‘I found this particularly helpful, especially when we likened similar words (e.g. synonyms, links to Latin words, groups of words such as impersonal verbs.)’

Breaking down words, together with the concept of vowel changes was felt to be empowering (‘helpful A LOT’). Students were particularly keen on synonyms and antonyms:

- ‘Synonyms and relating words to Latin meant learning vocabulary did not feel solely a brute-force activity and using Latin linked vocabulary to my far superior knowledge of Latin words as I have always struggled with learning Greek vocabulary.’
- ‘I found this useful as I could place a word rather than it being on its own in my head.’

Grouping words by subject/concept was also appreciated: ‘Means you access whole group when you remember one – useful for passages on themes – less work.’ Recall, by picking out new items of vocabulary straight after we had just gone through a few lines, was appreciated: ‘Another chance to think about the clause.’ All those with Latin thought that the technique of linking Greek vocabulary to Latin (which I started to do more in the second week) was helpful.

Quizzes

Over the fortnight, the students had enjoyed the ‘tests that are not a test’ as a low-stress way of seeing what they had absorbed because I did not see them or record marks from them. How did they see them looking back?

- ‘Very helpful. It’s a helpful post-paration.’
- ‘I really liked this as it helped me identify the most important links and new information from the previous session as well as promoting recall of new information.’

- ‘Wonderful.’
- ‘They are better for making me remember vocabulary/grammar than memorising information regularly.’
- ‘The informal questionnaires have surprised me with how quickly I recall teaching points from previous lessons, and I think are a good indication that this method works.’
- ‘The quick questions to test what we have learned so far because they make us recall the information and confirms it in our mind.’
- ‘I find the recall of previous lessons very helpful – especially the tests because they help me know which revision methods work for me.’

Subvocalisation

I had originally suggested to the students that subvocalisation - saying answers very softly with others, or even after others - would help keep them all involved and could be beneficial to the quieter students who knew the answer but did not feel confident. Seven students identified it as helping them:

1. ‘Excellent.’
2. ‘Reading and subvocalisation were really good for bringing the Greek to life in my mind and really grounding it as a living language. It fitted together more as a piece, rather than just treating it as a ‘code-breaking’ exercise.’
3. ‘Subvocalisation is an easy, no-effort way of improving memory.’
4. ‘Under-my-voice has definitely made a difference to my recall.’
5. ‘For some reason it helps me remember, and I can tell the difference when I don’t use it.’

Conclusions

This was certainly an atypical group: high-flying, highly motivated (giving up two weeks of their summer holiday) who had all been taught to a high level by excellent classics teachers who had nurtured them to this point.

What was helpful from the perspective of this study was that they were also good at analysing what they were doing, what was working and putting their experience into words. They were very willing to give new methods a go. They would, no doubt, have also made good progress if they had prepared texts in advance of each class as is the normal practice.

Did they gain from this less conventional approach? Since I have no control group, it is impossible to say so definitively. However, their comments suggest that they were making good progress without using their normal tried and tested memorisation routines. They themselves suggested that they enjoyed the process and were sometimes surprised at the progress that they were making. Certainly, this group was by far the most engaged, vibrant and fun group I have taught in my years at the summer school. It does suggest that, given the right atmosphere, recall and repetition, vocabulary and grammar can be acquired at a fast rate once the basics of grammar, syntax and vocabulary have been acquired.

I had anticipated that we would read more text than usual. In the event, we read about the same amount of text as my groups in previous years who had used the more usual preparation in advance approach. The left-to right approach, reading out loud and recall slowed us down, but the students understood the Greek and content much better, and absorbed much more in the process.

I would, then, highlight the following as the main lessons of this fortnight of experimentation:

- Reading out loud was useful. It emphasised the fact that we were reading a real language and it speeded up the learning process in the longer term.
- Emphasising the content at all times meant that the language never became divorced from the meaning. It was seen as a medium of communication – and the content was remembered without much conscious effort.
- The time and mental space freed up by not requiring preparation meant that students made excellent progress in vocabulary learning.
- Although we did not have any separate grammar sessions but integrated grammar instruction into the modelling of the text, the students considered that their grammar had improved.
- Despite not being asked to prepare in advance, they all felt that their fluency in reading had improved, sometimes considerably. So had their accuracy – they were forced to notice things a translation would gloss over.
- The various ways of linking new vocabulary to pre-existing vocabulary were effective in helping them to widen their vocabulary without their going through an explicit memorisation process. They enjoyed these techniques.
- Recall and repetition in context was also very effective in building up vocabulary.
- Sub-vocalisation was a useful tool for some students.
- The students felt empowered by the experience: the act of thinking about the approach in itself was helpful in giving them insights into their learning.

At the start of this article, I referred to an account of teaching by Guarino which inspired me to use some methods from the Renaissance. I used some of Guarino's principles of modelling, questioning and repetition: these unfamiliar approaches brought benefits. However, I chose not to follow Guarino where 'he elegantly and lucidly expresses the meaning of the text in a few words'. As

noted, I was interested in seeing how I might help facilitate students' reading fluency over the two weeks, in a way that would bridge their experience between school and university, and I considered that a 'left-to-right' reading method would bring longer-term benefits for the next stage of their education.

As a final question in the feedback questionnaire, I asked the students if there were any techniques that they had met on the Summer School that they would continue to use. All identified one or more – and these covered a large range of what I have discussed above. I hope that they started their university careers not only more fluent in Greek but with a good set of tools to continue their progress in Latin as well as Greek. My thanks to the 11 students who worked so hard and with such good humour over the fortnight.

Note

1 JACT Greek Summer School: <https://www.greeksummerschool.org/>

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