

Research Article

Forum

In Greek we trust! Παίζοντες μανθάνομεν

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Abstract

This article presents the method used in Elliniki Agogi, a private small school that teaches the Ancient Greek language as an extra-curricular activity. Over the 29 years of experimenting with educational material, methods, books and exercises, teaching Ancient Greek as a living language seems like the only method that really works for the students. It is immersive, experiential, educational and fun, but most important, it makes students love what they learn; by loving, they keep wanting to come back. By coming back, they repeat. By repeating; they learn. And by learning Greek as a living language, they never forget it. This is our school's aim: to make our students love the language. Experiential learning is highly valued and applied through visits to archaeological sites, and reviving important historical events. But this is only the beginning; playing, drawing, acting, foreign exchanges, educational trips, digital programs, collaborations with foreign institutions and educational organisations come alive in Elliniki Agogi, a small school that was founded 29 years ago in Greece and has joined worldwide efforts in changing the way Greek is taught in order to promote its true, timeless, precious wisdom. In Elliniki Agogi a combination of teaching Greek as a living language and activities that include play and fun, a method as old as time, shows exactly the reason way the words 'play' (παιδιά) and 'education' (παιδεία) derive from the exact same root word: παῖς (child). Educational material is also provided in order to further enhance and deepen children's knowledge.

Keywords: Ancient Greek, Teaching Methodology, Experiential Learning, Innovative teaching, Positive stimulation

Introduction

Elliniki Agogi is a small private afternoon school where Ancient Greek, Greek history and philosophy have been taught since 1994, once a week, for 90 minutes, as an extra curricular activity.¹ We currently have about 200 students, 70% of which are primary school students.

Teaching is done in an experiential and interactive way that helps children learn the language quickly and effortlessly. We focus on making sure that children enjoy learning Ancient Greek, making it a language that can be part of their daily experiences. Furthermore, by providing out-of-class experiences, we give our students a chance to collect valuable information about their own interests and goals (Wurdinger, 2005).

Classes from first to fourth grade are done mainly through play and art. In fifth and sixth grade, children are introduced gradually to Ancient Greek grammar, while the selected texts and vocabulary become more challenging, providing students with the groundwork for high school. Until then, however, the necessary preparation has been made in such a way that children have already loved the language and are ready to face the difficulties that arise.

As it is now, in Greece Ancient Greek is introduced to students in high school. At Elliniki Agogi the learning of Ancient Greek

starts at pre-school. Our goal and hope is to eventually convince public educators in Greece that introducing children to Ancient Greek at an early age allows deeper learning of the language at the high school years. That is, entering high school these students will already have the innate ability and acquired skills to read from original texts faster and absorb their rich meanings and essence. Moreover, this may also end up 'encouraging more students to take up classical subjects which would in turn have the potential to provide them with greater access to the more academic universities' (Hunt, 2018). It is our school's belief that the knowledge of Ancient Greek offers an 'international passport' with which children can achieve any academic goal.

Method of teaching

From the first day of class, the teachers speak to students, even to pre-schoolers, in Ancient Greek. Addressing children whose native language is modern Greek greatly enables immersive language teaching. Words like: χαίρε, ύγίαινε, πολλές χάριτας, πώς έχεις etc. are repeatedly used and are not so different from their similar modern Greek words. For example, when we meet someone, we say «χαίρω πολύ» (nice meeting you), instead of χαίρε. When we greet someone, we say «γεια» (hello) which is short for ύγίεια. When we thank someone, we say «ευχαριστώ». We use the adverbs καλώς and κακώς just as often, so our children naturally understand (see Figure 1).

In Elliniki Agogi our teachers practice with the students and improve language skills. Reading and speaking with expression,

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Χαίρε!	Χαίρω πολύ!
Υγίανε!	Γεια!
Πολλὰς χάριτας!	Ευχαριστώ!
Καλῶς, κακῶς...	Καλῶς, κακῶς...

Figure 1. Common greetings in Greek.

emphasising and acting according to the text, exaggerating the tone of the voice and articulation is a great help. As David Urbanski mentions, ‘active Latin (Greek in this case) has yielded the most wonderful results in my classroom’ (Urbanski, 2021).

Playing constitutes a basic teaching tool at these ages. Παίζοντες μανθάνομεν, we learn by playing. Besides, the words ‘play’ (παίζω) and ‘education’ (παιδεία) have as a common root the word ‘child’ (παῖς). We educate children by playing. Οἱ παῖδες παιδεύονται παίζοντες παιδιάν (see Figure 2).

We choose to play games that are already familiar to children, their only rule being that they should try and speak exclusively in Ancient Greek during the game. This creates fun, but also, in the children’s mind, Ancient Greek is directly connected to something pleasant. Once the text is taught and understood, students are transformed into foxes that complain when «οἱ βότρυες ὄμφακές εἰσιν»,² to castaways advising «σύν Ἀθηνά καὶ σὺ τὴν χεῖρα κίνει»,³ to wolves who find out that «ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ ἐπαύλει, ἄλλα μὲν λέγουσιν, ἄλλα δὲ πράττουσιν»⁴... (see Figure 3).

To improve children’s literacy, we remake well-known children’s songs or create our own using Ancient Greek poems, in order to get children to sing the words, rather than just saying them (Smith, 2000). As the school year progresses and students’ speech evolves, we insist a lot on articulation. It is of crucial importance that the endings of words are clearly heard – τὸ καλόν, τὸ γοργόν, αἰὲν ἀριστεύειν – and to accentuate the words correctly, to facilitate understanding as well as speaking (Kuhn et al., 2010, p. 233).

Experiential learning

Teaching in archaeological sites is a great way to get children’s attention. We have the rare privilege to teach in museums, explain the history of ancient Athens, walking and talking at the same places where Socrates spoke; we have debated on the sacred rock of Pnyx, and recited Delphic maxims in Delphi. We honoured the Salamis warriors on the 2,500th anniversary of the naval battle with a theatrical play in Salamis.⁵ We paid tribute to Leonidas and his companions with a similar theatrical play in a small forest, reciting Thucydides and Herodotus.⁶

All these visits, plays, tributes, in addition to the knowledge they offer, help children learn historical events of major importance in such a way that they will never forget them. But at the same time, they create a community, a group of children with healthy standards and high goals. All of our students show significant improvement in school, in all subjects, not just those related to language. Later, in high school they become successful and effective students; they excel and they all graduate from university, regardless of major.

The experience of 29 years of operation at Elliniki Agogi has proved that learning Ancient Greek from an early age, from primary school or even kindergarten produces successful results both academically and personally. This is the reason why we insist that children in Greece should start their involvement with Ancient Greek in primary school and not in the 7th grade as is the case now. Students start learning the complex rules of grammar and syntax the first day of 7th grade. The ancient texts are taught in modern Greek translation and Ancient Greek in the Greek schools is just a lesson full of rules that is mostly taught in a

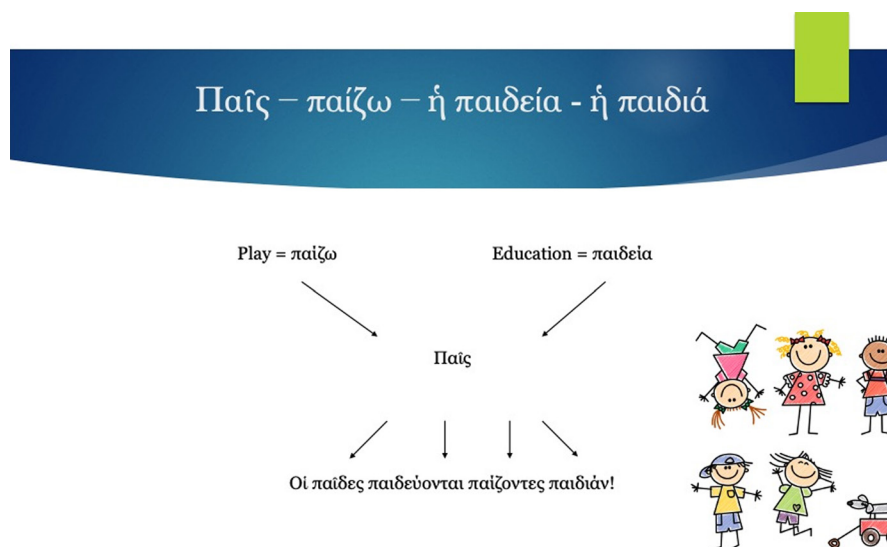


Figure 2. Derivations of the Greek word child/παῖς.



Figure 3. Extracts from Aesop's Fables.

mechanical and repulsive way. This is why 77.1% of Greeks believe that Ancient Greek at the Greek schools is not taught in such a way that would make students love it. (Marc Polling Company, Nationwide survey, April 2021) (see Figure 4).⁷

Educational events

Apart from teaching in class, we encourage our students to participate in educational events with foreign schools and organisations, in a continuous effort to prove that the knowledge of Ancient Greek literally expands their horizons.

- In 2019 we organised an event with the Sacré Cœur de Mons school in Belgium where students of both schools recited philosophical dialogues in Ancient Greek.⁸
- In September 2021 a group of students presented the story of the ancient Pentathlon on the international Pierre de Coubertin Pentathlon day.⁹
- In November 2021, we participated in the art exhibition dedicated to the Olympic Games of the Jintai Museum in Beijing. As part of the cultural events for the Beijing Winter Olympics, a group of students aged 5 to 10 recited excerpts from Pindar's hymns

accompanied by an Ancient Greek seven-string lyre, while our teenage students impersonated philosophers on an original philosophical work based on human values. In collaboration with the Beijing Academy middle school, whose students presented similar activities reciting Ancient Chinese philosophy, the two schools were united through technology and symbolically united two of the most ancient civilisations: the Greek and the Chinese.¹⁰

We try to follow the examples of Professors Miraglia¹¹ and Rico¹² and other teachers who teach Ancient Greek speaking exclusively in this language. We haven't reached this level of fluency yet, but we are well on our way. Elliniki Agogi is in contact with both the Vivarium Novum Academy and the Polis Institute.

In 2021, students aged 11 to 16 participated in LanguageCert's Classical Greek exams for levels A1 and A2. The Classical Greek Language Certificate is the first certificate of Ancient Greek created by the company PeopleCert/LanguageCert, a company with a global reach in the field of certifications. The examination is done online; it has the characteristics of a modern language examination, but at the same time it embodies the spirit of the Ancient Greek literature (Coniam *et al.*, 2022).

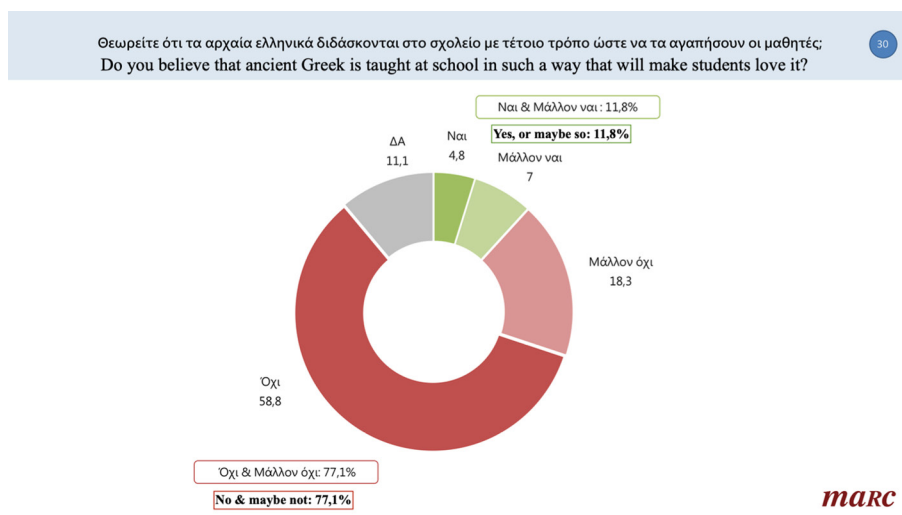


Figure 4. Marc Polling Company – attitudes to the way Ancient Greek is taught in the classroom (2021).

This is a form of officially assessing our students, since in Elliniki Agogi we do not grade children and their only obligation is to attend classes. At the end of each school year, we present a two-hour play where about 200 children participate, speaking exclusively in Ancient Greek.

With all these actions, efforts and participations, we prove to our students that by learning Greek they acquire knowledge of centuries, and at the same time, deep values for their lives, regardless of the major they wish to study. Take for example Dr Ioannides, Professor of Medicine at the University of Stanford, who teaches Greek poetry and is neither a poet, nor a philologist.¹³ Greek is indeed limitless.

Conclusion

Teaching Ancient Greek to elementary school students at a time when children are so familiar with technology and connect the educational process with it, presents challenges and opportunities for us, as educators. In addition to the knowledge we convey, we invent ways to connect technology, extroversion, innovation and the future of education, with the knowledge, values and ethics of classical texts. It is a long process, but full of opportunities, both for the students and for us. But when we see the results, we realise, once again, the timelessness and topicality of texts in an era that, although it bears no resemblance to antiquity, its texts look as if they were written today.

From our small pre-schoolers' classroom, to the older children of elementary, middle and high school, through computers and digital programs, through play and fun we prove to our students daily the importance and wealth of classical education and guide them through the herculean path of virtue that is opened widely to them. A path with challenges, but also great opportunities. A path that was opened to us, exclusively, through our love for Greek. By trusting in Greek, we invest in a future of limitless knowledge, immense possibilities and mental strength for our children and for generations to come. It may seem like an oxymoron, but all we really do is play. Παίζοντες γαρ, καὶ ἡμεῖς μανθάνομεν. By playing, we also learn.

Notes

- 1 <https://ellinikiagogi.gr/?lang=en>.
- 2 Aesop's fable, the Fox and the Grapes.
- 3 Aesop's fable, Shipwrecked.
- 4 Aesop's fable, the Mother and the Wolf.
- 5 Battle of Salamis: https://youtu.be/qF_8poYTiUY.
- 6 Thermopylae, a play in Ancient Greek: <https://youtu.be/uVCupHaKwYA>.
- 7 Nationwide survey conducted by the polling company Marc in April 2021 which shows the opinion of Greeks regarding the teaching of Ancient Greek at school. The survey was conducted through telephone interviews in 800 households.
- 8 Philosophical dialogues among students in Ancient Greek: <https://youtu.be/T7vOqoz44B0>.
- 9 Pentathlon, a play in Ancient Greek: <https://youtu.be/pY8CrngwIKs>.
- 10 Voice of Diplomacy, China | Greek and Chinese Cultural Exchange: <https://youtu.be/phcCquOtmNk>.
- 11 Luigi Miraglia, Vivarium Novum Academy.
- 12 Christophe Rico, Polis Institute.
- 13 <https://profiles.stanford.edu/john-ioannidis> Dr. Ioannidis teaches «The Cosmopolitan Introvert: Modern Greek Poetry and its Itinerants».

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