

A Celebration of Greek Language and Culture Education in the UK

by Athina Mitropoulos and Arlene Holmes-Henderson

On Saturday 10 June 2016, the Ambassador of the Hellenic Republic to the UK, Mr. Konstantinos Bikas, and the Classics in Communities project hosted a conference celebrating the teaching of Greek language and culture in the UK at the Hellenic Centre in London. The conference had multiple aims: to bring together a variety of teachers, committees and associations to discuss the state of Greek language and culture education in the UK; to anticipate and confront the challenges; and to collaborate to find solutions and action plans for its survival and growth.

The conference was opened by Mr Bikas, who warmly shared the debt he personally owes to the Ancient Greek language. It was only through studying this ancient language's grammar and syntax that he was able to fully command his own modern one – a skill he has continually relied upon and needed throughout his diplomatic career. His debt of gratitude to the Ancient Greeks was shared by the conference participants and was at the core of presenters' speeches. Everyone present was committed to preserving and expanding the study of the Greeks' language and culture in UK classrooms.

The current state of Greek language and culture education in the UK is mixed. Presentations from Dr Arlene Holmes-Henderson, a Postdoctoral Researcher in Classics Education at the University of Oxford, Caroline Bristow, one of two OCR Classics Subject Specialists, Lisa Hay from Hitchin Girls' School, Sarah Brack from Burntwood School, Ben Hewitt from Fairstead House School, Athina Mitropoulos from Cranleigh School and Dr Evelien Bracke, a Senior Lecturer and the Employability and School Liaison Officer at Swansea University, provided much insight into how the Ancient Greek language and culture is being taught. Dr Constantine Athanasiadis, from St Sophia's School and Reverends Roger and Rachel Larkinson, from the Methodist Church, also discussed the teaching of Modern and New Testament Greek. Although Modern

Greek is estimated to be taught at around 500 schools across the UK and the A Level in Modern Greek is continuing, Ancient Greek at any level is no longer part of national secondary school curricula in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. In England, OCR is the only examining body offering GCSE and A Level in Ancient Greek and the number of students sitting exams has been steady for the past few years. Around 1,300 students sit GCSE Ancient Greek. The number drops significantly at AS and A2 level, where approximately 250 learners per year choose to continue with Ancient Greek. These students are, however, almost all from independent schools, with only around ten state schools in the UK still teaching the Ancient Greek language.

Since September 2014, Ancient Greek has been listed in the primary national curriculum as a language suitable for study by children aged seven to eleven years old. This means that primary schools in England can now teach Ancient Greek as their foreign language. This last point gives tremendous hope as it provides the scope for teaching pupils at a young age. Progress is hindered, however, by a lack of specialist teacher training and age-appropriate resources. The Classics in Communities project is working hard to deliver training and, in collaboration with others, provide appropriately stimulating classroom materials.

The teaching of Greek culture, however, is stronger. Within the primary national curriculum, all pupils are taught



Figure 1. | Mr Konstantinos Bikas opens the conference.

about the Ancient Greeks and subjects such as Classical Civilisation and Ancient History are available for GCSE and A Level. Around 3,000 students every year sit exams in Ancient History and around 13,500 choose to do so for Classical Civilisation. Although the numbers of these individual subjects fluctuate, the overall picture in England is positive: there are four GCSE and A Level subjects (Ancient Greek, Modern Greek, Classical Civilisation and Ancient History) through which pupils can engage with study of the Ancient Greeks. Greek language and Classical Greek and Roman Studies are offered as part of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme, studied by a small number of students in schools worldwide (including at least 15 in the UK). In Scotland, Classical Civilisation (known as Classical Studies) remains a popular subject in the schools where it is taught. Despite the challenges that are faced, we must celebrate the opportunities available to study the Greeks in UK schools.

Despite these positive steps, there are still a number of challenges being faced. Although the Key Stage 2 curriculum incorporates Greek, there is a real shortage for qualified teachers at primary school level. Ancient Greek is perceived as being 'hard' and 'elitist' and many teachers think it must be studied alongside Latin. The numbers studying both Ancient and Modern Greek are small, making them often not cost-effective or viable in numerous schools, particularly in state-maintained schools. Moreover, if they are taught, it is often off-timetable:

not only are teachers and pupils working in their free time, either before or after school, but they often have to complete an accelerated course in record time. Finally, more could be done to strengthen the Classics teaching community: we need greater opportunity to share good practice and we need better promotion of support available (both financial and in kind).

The conference did exactly this. It showcased the variety of associations and committees which are dedicated to helping support, maintain and further the education of Greek language and culture. Dr Arlene Holmes-Henderson, through Classics in Communities, is doing research into the value of teaching Ancient Greek on the cognitive development of pupils in primary schools. She is also involved with training primary school teachers to teach Ancient Greek. Caroline Bristow outlined what OCR is doing, and can do in future, to support teachers and learners in schools. Dr Cressida Ryan, a lecturer in Theology at the University of Oxford, considered the case from a non-Classical context and remarked how Ancient Greek is 'easy' compared with other Theological languages, such as Hebrew or Aramaic. Dr Kathryn Tempest, a Senior Lecturer at the University of Roehampton, and Outreach Officer for the Classical Association, spoke of the support the Classical Association, the largest Classical organisation in Great Britain, aims to give to the teaching of Greek language and culture. Local branches of the Classical Association hold school reading competitions, play readings and support outings to places of Classical interest. The

Classical Association also provides conference bursaries and contributes to major academic projects, as well as producing three annual academic journals. Dr Zetta Theodoropoulou Polychroniadis presented the involvement of the Greek Archaeological Committee UK, highlighting universities, such as the University of Sheffield, where pupils can go and experience an archaeological dig first hand. This committee also provides scholarships to Greek and Cypriot students, and holds two annual lectures. She also spoke of the British School at Athens which has a Schoolteacher Fellowship, for research into teaching Ancient Greek language and culture, and undergraduate and graduate programmes. Hilary Hodgson then introduced the work of Classics for All, which provides support and funding for teaching Ancient Greek at primary and secondary state schools. Anne Wright presented *Gorilla Greek*, a school text book and website that provides an introduction to basic vocabulary and grammar, and points out the strong relationship between Ancient Greek and English. Ben Hewitt talked about his teaching of literacy through Ancient Greek at a preparatory school in Newmarket. Henry Cullen spoke about the JACT Greek Summer School at Bryanston, which provides annual courses for beginners, intermediate and advanced learners of Ancient Greek. Sarah Brack and Lisa Hay outlined ways in which Greek can be taught effectively in state schools. Dr Evelien Bracke gave an update on the Cymru Wales Classics Hub and the status of Greek language and culture



Figure 2. | Teachers' roundtable discussion (l-r: Lisa Hay, Sarah Brack, Athena Mitropoulos, Hilary Hodgson (Classics for All / Chair), Ben Hewitt, Henry Cullen, Anne Wright).



Figure 3. | Conference delegates.

education in Wales. Finally, Dr Sonya Nevin presented the Panoply Project, an online animation of Ancient Greek vases, which brings ancient history, art and mythology to life. The sheer number and variety of initiatives described at the conference prove how much goodwill and enthusiasm there is for the promotion of Ancient Greek language and culture in the UK. The aim is now to spread the word further, to engage with English and Greek members of the public and to help connect people who are striving to expand access to the study of the Greeks.

Much still remains to be done. There are many schools, headteachers, teachers, parents and pupils who do not yet appreciate the value of the Ancient Greek language and culture. While they can be found on pamphlets on the OCR website, we shall summarise a few of the many points that were shared at the conference. Firstly, learning about the Greeks is hugely enjoyable. In the variety that the subject offers – from language to philosophy, from history to archaeology, from comedy to tragedy – there is something for everybody and pupils respond very positively to this breadth. Secondly, it teaches and fosters a number of skills: analytical, deductive, methodical, persuasive and evaluative. In a world of swift technological advances, these transferable skills are invaluable for a vast number of careers. Finally, at present, pupils who study the Ancient Greeks stand out amongst their peers, as it is not a universally studied subject. While we hope this situation will change soon (everyone should have access to learning about the Greeks in secondary school), pupils should be encouraged to take the opportunities available to them. Another avenue that still

needs further exploration is the role that universities and university students can play in this. While one-off days may whet the appetite of pupils, long-term initiatives are needed, such as training primary school teachers to teach Ancient Greek, or through Skype conversations with existing classes to provide interactive teaching and learning. The Greek community could likewise further act as ambassadors for Greek culture within schools, or help provide training for teachers in language and history. The goodwill is there – it just needs harnessing.

Mr Bikas closed the conference, sharing two initiatives that were hugely inspiring and optimistic for the future. Firstly, he spoke of a project with Burntwood Academy in Tooting, London, where a group of pupils studying Greek was given the opportunity to visit Athens and see a number of ancient sites. Upon returning to England, they shared their experiences with the school body and acted as ambassadors for Greek language and culture in other schools. We should never underestimate the vital role the pupils themselves play in the spread of Greek language and culture education and this is a perfect example of how they can inspire others to want to learn. Secondly, Mr Bikas spoke of an upcoming exhibition in the Science Museum, which will showcase the scientific discoveries of the Ancient Greeks. This is another fantastic way of showing the public the debt modern society owes to the Ancient Greeks and will surely spark significant interest in the ancient world.

The conference did highlight many challenges. Opportunities to learn about the Greeks in the UK are far from

inclusive or secure. Nevertheless, the room was filled with people of all backgrounds, eager to promote the subjects. The majority of the audience was already working extra hours, often unpaid, to inspire and foster a deep knowledge and passion for the Greeks. This goodwill signals tremendous hope. The respect, appreciation and love held for this civilisation, and the proactive nature of all who are involved with it, demonstrates just how cherished the Greeks are in the UK.

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If you enjoyed this article and would like to read more about the teaching of Ancient Greek in UK schools, see the following other JCT articles:

Barker, A. (2013). The Experiences of Students Learning Greek in a Mixed-Year Extra-Curricular Club. An Investigation. *Journal of Classics Teaching*, 27, pp. 34-39. Can be accessed through the ARLT [here](#).

Wright, A. (2015). Running a Greek Club – The Hereford Cathedral School Experience. *Journal of Classics Teaching*, 32, pp. 21-24. Access [here](#).

Holmes-Henderson, A. (2016). Teaching Latin and Greek in Primary Schools. The Classics in Communities Project. *Journal of Classics Teaching*, 33, pp. 50-53. Access [here](#).