

Research Article

Forum

The Nausicaa experience: Teaching Ancient Greek in French preschools and primary schools

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Abstract

In the Marseille region in France, ancient Greek has been taught in pre-school and primary school for more than 20 years. The ‘Nausicaa’ Association was created in 1996 with an express purpose in mind. As Nausicaa was Odysseus’ guide and helped him regain his dignity as a man and a king, so our association supports children in becoming more complete and richer humans, or so we hope. *Nausicaa* has grown enormously in the past 20 years, and currently operates in various schools in the South of France, in particular in Marseille and Aix-en-Provence. Around ten volunteers (teachers working in middle school, high school or retired) teach ancient Greek to pupils from pre-school to the end of primary school. All activities are done at school during class teaching time and in the school setting. This paper presents an outline of the activities of the Nausicaa Association and how it benefits pupils of all abilities in learning about the ancient Greeks and their language.

Keywords: primary education, ancient Greek, pedagogy, special needs

Curriculum

Our Greek teachers set up their lessons in partnership with the actual schoolteachers. We always make sure we take part in the pedagogical project of the class by discussing with the schoolteacher which themes to choose. The intervention can last all year round at the rate of one hour per week or be done over a more limited period. Certain pre-school classes have a fixed theme for the entire school year, and so we also teach aspects of that theme, even when the theme is that of small birds, in which case we teach Apollo and the crow, Hera and the peacock, Alectryon and the rooster, Daedalus and the partridge, and other stories from Greek myth.

In primary school, depending on the class, the time of year, or the educational project of the class, we can work on constellations, gods, monsters, or a grammatical point. We use all of the educational material that children are used to using, such as their binder, notebook, blackboard, slate, digital board, posters, and books. The pupils find themselves in their accustomed school environment but without any assessment and with plenty of encouragement. In this way, even children with learning difficulties can take part: Greek allows them to write differently, to learn at their own pace, to start a new subject from scratch, and have a sense

of achievement. Pupils also discover a new writing system with a different graphic design. Greek writing is not cursive, so it is easy for everyone to reproduce the letters, because children instinctively perceive their pictorial origin. For example, the α represents the head of a bull lying down or a specific fish. There is no spelling trap: you write everything you say! The children have the impression of entering a mysterious universe to which not everyone has the keys. This allows everyone to find themselves on an equal footing and to forget social backgrounds.

Class structure

Our classes are always structured similarly. We always start by telling a story from Greek mythology. In addition to the ‘intellectual’ knowledge provided by myths, mythology itself, like fairy tales, offers children the opportunity to exteriorise their fears. The most gruesome stories make them shudder with delight: killing your father and marrying your mother, gouging out your eyes, sacrificing your daughter, killing your brother’s children and feeding them to him. Imagining themselves fighting fictitious monsters is also exhilarating, such as a half man-half bull creature, a snake-haired woman, or a serpent with multiple heads which grow back as soon as they are cut off.

After this introduction, pupils are taught one or more Greek words. Depending on the level, a discussion of the roots of these words will make it possible to enrich their vocabulary, their understanding of etymology, and their French literacy by making progress in orthography.

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answer 'ἄνθρωπος ἐστὶ' ['He is a man'], or a child can show it by saying 'ἄνθρωπος εἶ' ['You are a man']. Thus, little by little, the children learn the verb εἶμι [I am] in the present tense.

Then a pupil plays the role of Prometheus and others that of the men. Each of them is presented with an animal that must be terrible and they must take turns in saying: 'φόβος, fear'. After a while, as there are many ἄνθρωποι [men] who are terrified, Prometheus wants to defend them. He is going to go to the realm of the gods to steal part of the sun, ἥλιος. Children learn this word. Then, the pupil who plays Prometheus says: 'κλέπτω τὸ πῦρ, I steal the fire', pretends to hide the fire in a fennel stem, and says: 'κρύπτω τὸ πῦρ, I hide the fire'. Thus, we begin the grammatical learning of the declension, which is not difficult for the moment since these are minimal sentences and a neuter word. For the rest of the session, the teacher works on vocabulary and spelling. For example, she shows pupils that the root of πῦρ [fire] gave us pyrolysis, pyrography and pyrotechnics. But above all it makes pupils discover that the ancient Greek 'υ' (i-grecque) in French becomes the i. The playful dimension is important: the teacher shows pupils that the root of κρύπτω [I hide] gives us crypt and cryptogram, and she allows them to have fun building cryptograms. She can also do the same with ἥλιος [sun] which has given us the French heliotrope: one pupil will be the sun [ἥλιος], while the others will represent heliotrope flowers. When the sun moves, the heliotropes follow its movement, shouting: 'ἥλιος, ἥλιος, ἥλιος!' ['The sun, the sun, the sun!']. The game can be used to memorise vocabulary. It is possible to end the session with a song to the tune of 'Frère Jacques':

κλέπτω, κλέπτω
κρύπτω, κρύπτω
φόβος, φόβος, φόβος

In other sessions, the teacher approaches the accusative with slightly more complex sentences. For example, after studying the

sentence ὁ θεὸς βλέπει τὸν ἄνθρωπον [The god looks at the man], if we ask the class to say in Greek 'The man looks at the god', we will always get the answer: 'τὸν ἄνθρωπον βλέπει ὁ θεός'. Pupils are then told that the meaning has not changed, and the teacher asks them the question: How to do it? Pupils are then invited to analyse the endings of the words and, little by little, learn, without pronouncing the name of the grammatical categories, what is in reality a declension.

Children with learning difficulties

Many failures at school are due to a deep malaise that certain children feel very early on when they are immersed in the school environment, an environment that may appear hostile or too restrictive to them (on account of a bad separation from the family atmosphere, fear of not living up to badly formulated or badly understood expectations). There are many children who are intelligent yet who nevertheless fail in the school environment. These children often have real suffering, and find an escape in isolation or in an assumed role of rebel. It is then a question of showing them that the path to success is open to them. But how to reintegrate them into school? Our experience allows us to affirm that the Greek practised in the 'Nausicaa' project is an open door on this path for such children (Figure 2).

The story of André is the most striking. During a first intervention in a class, the teacher asks a child at random to come forward and say his name. Even before he is able to open his mouth, the replies from his classmates burst forth from all sides: 'It's the zero!' and here is our well-characterised child in this role which he apparently accepts well since he advances, a blissful smile on his lips, while waddling. The speaker asks again: 'What is your name?'. The child changes his attitude, his shoulders drop, he tucks his chin in and whispers in a very small voice: 'André'. He had moved from the character he was playing that allowed him to exist in the class group to the reality of his identity, that was much less acceptable to him under present conditions. But what a great first name!



Figure 2. 10 young people with learning disabilities in a specialised class at Collège Sévigné in Marseille do their Greek.



Figure 3. Work completed by students with special educational needs at Nasicaa.

The teacher then explains to André and his classmates, who gradually stop their sarcasm, the meaning of this first name in Greek: ‘The man, the real one, the male, the hero’. André became interested in Greek and paid attention, which, for him, was a great victory! Over the weeks André traced Greek letters, and over time his ‘Greek notebook’ became cleaner and cleaner. It was another victory. His notebook was kept fairly well. The Greek alphabet was a different life for him, in which he felt valued, where the path to success was possible. French words reinforced by etymology took on meaning. This is how the path to success opened up for André.

We have also intervened in classes (of maximum 10 pupils) which welcome young people with disabilities, in ULIS class (Local Unit for School Inclusion). We applied more or less the same basic methodology, but went much more slowly and always used concrete examples: we recounted the journey of Protis, for example, who founded Marseille, and provided a photocopy of a boat. We had

each pupil choose a minor character: they coloured it in, gave it his name, and stuck it on the boat. We then embarked on beautiful adventures by boat. We played with labels with Greek names and their roots on them. What joy, when at the end of the year, while handling her labels, one girl said to the teacher: ‘Basically, you are a mythologist!’ (Figure 3).

Conclusion

The notion of pleasure is, in our experience, essential when teaching ancient Greek at pre-school or primary school level: pleasure that the children show, pleasure to see them impatiently waiting for the Greek course, but also pleasure for us who see them progressing, enriching their lives. That’s wonderful. If we had to sum up our action with a slogan, it would be ‘Excellence for all!’ Let’s make children long for ancient Greek.