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Research Article

Forum

Teaching Latin and ancient Greek in the 21st-century Primary School: Framing local approaches to international challenges

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Abstract

The idea for this special issue of *Journal of Classics Teaching* arose from the conference 'Monsters in the classroom: Latin and Greek at primary school' which Steve Hunt (Cambridge), Lidewij Van Gils (Amsterdam), and myself (Ghent) co-organised in January of 2022.[1] This conference gathered teaching expertise from eight countries and attracted more than 120 participants from 20 countries to discuss both the successes and challenges related to current international practice in the teaching of Classical languages at primary school. It became a constructive and fruitful event, where participants from different countries shared good practice in order to learn from each other and formulate steps forward.

Keywords: Multilingual, bilingual, local

Monsters in the classroom?

Our reason for organising this conference was our own increased awareness – in recent years – of projects throughout Europe and the United States which widen participation of Classical languages at primary school level, often with the aim of providing equal opportunities for all pupils to come into contact with the study of antiquity, and of supporting children's literacy skills. Indeed, while Latin and ancient Greek are not curricular or indeed mainstream subjects in the primary school curriculum worldwide, they are nevertheless taught at primary school level in a number of countries in Europe as well as in the US, whether through established formats (e.g. the *Aequora* project in the US,[2] *Nausicaä* in the South of France,[3] or via the work by *Classics for All* in the UK[4]) or through more recent or small-scale projects (e.g. *Ancient Greeks – Young Heroes* in Belgium,[5] or Alette Rosing's work in the Netherlands[6]). Yet there are challenges facing many of these projects.

First, in spite of the existence of extensive didactic expertise in different countries and linguistic contexts, knowledge about projects – let alone collaboration between projects – in different countries, has so far been minimal. This means small-scale projects cannot build onto earlier work done, or learn from mistakes made. Secondly, the majority of volunteer-run projects tend to be driven by teachers and/or academics with a passion for sharing knowledge about antiquity with primary school children. This heavy reliance on passionate coordinators not only means that most project teachers have little time for additional activities (such as finding out about similar international projects), but also that the longevity of such projects is continuously at risk, as the case of Taddei and Di Donato in this issue reveals. Thirdly, in many countries,[7] focusing on languages and cultures goes directly against a governmental STEM-oriented agenda, and many prejudices exist specifically against supposed 'dead' languages, from being useless to being elitist and everything in between (Bracke, 2023, pp. 108–11). The impact of these challenges cannot be overestimated, as it means projects face significant pressures, prejudices, and hurdles before teachers have even set foot into the classroom. What I hear from teachers time and again is that, without sustained external funding or a support network, the project stands or falls with them.

This conference was therefore designed to provide a forum for primary Classics teachers, not only to share good practice but also to discuss the successes and pitfalls of didactic approaches as well as these external pressures that constrain classroom practice. We chose the title 'Monsters in the classroom' to reflect this ambivalence experienced by teachers, on the one hand feeling joy in sharing a subject we feel passionate about (exemplified by stories about mythical monsters, who are introduced to pupils), and on the other hand experiencing pressures from outside of the classroom, primarily the 'monster' of societal stereotypes surrounding the status of Classics and who it is for. The articles from Italy (Taddei and Di Donato – Latin), France (Duchemin *et al.*, – ancient Greek), the Netherlands (Van Gils – Latin and ancient Greek), the UK (Hunt – Latin and ancient Greek), Greece (Manolidou and Goulia – ancient Greek), the US (Bozia), and Belgium (see Bracke below – ancient Greek) all explore aspects of this ambivalence, yet reveal that our strength lies in the actual classroom practice. Indeed, what

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research from the past 60 years demonstrates most of all – alongside an improvement in literacy skills – is that engagement with these languages and the related cultures is meaningful to young people (Bracke, 2023, p. 25). I think that is key in our practice: even if it is difficult to quantify the impact on individual pupils – as it is sometimes unexpected or unknown, or even surfaces only later – the vast majority of primary school pupils coming into contact with Latin or ancient Greek through such projects experience it as adding meaning to their life. It is on the basis of this understanding that coordinators in different countries have been driven to design their primary Latin or ancient Greek projects. Yet this meaning is not derived from a supposed universal value of a Classical language, but always created in pupils' local socio-cultural and educational context. There is therefore not a single one approach to teaching Latin or ancient Greek at primary school which we ought to propose to respond to global issues such as an increasing educational gap between different social groups, a general decrease in literacy levels, or an increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in classrooms. Rather, local approaches are needed which apply current practices and innovations to their specific contexts, and which take the needs and contexts of their specific pupils into account – hence the title of this article.

In order to exemplify this local approach to international issues, for the remainder of this article, I will therefore share with you some reflections on the Latin and ancient Greek primary school projects I have coordinated over the course of almost 12 years now, both in Wales in the UK and in the Flemish region in Belgium. In both projects, my main aim has been to use Latin or ancient Greek learning as an emancipatory tool, yet the different approaches I have taken in both countries allow me to compare and contrast.[8]

Ancient Greek for Young Heroes

In 2011, I started training university students at Swansea University to teach Latin in local primary schools through the *Literacy through Classics* project (which is still running at Swansea).[9] When I started work at Ghent University in 2018, I designed a similar project to teach ancient Greek at primary school, called *Ancient Greeks – Young Heroes*.[10] The pupils my university students currently teach are between 10 and 12 years old, and they receive around 10 hours of ancient Greek spread over one semester. From the beginning, my work with primary schools has been shaped by my desire to support young people growing up in difficult circumstances, and therefore I primarily work with schools with high percentages of children from a low socioeconomic status (hereafter SES) background.

It is important to understand the specific challenges children from a low SES face. For growing up in poverty does not just mean less money is available: poverty impacts every aspect of a child's life, and has an impact on children's physical and mental health, and later in life, their career trajectory and political participation. It also means they tend to get fewer educational opportunities. When we look at Classics education in the Flemish region in Belgium, for example, Latin is still going quite strong as it is studied by around 10% of secondary school pupils. Ancient Greek, by contrast, may only be started during pupils' first year of Latin, and is thus solely accessible to those pupils who have already started studying Latin. Because of this restriction, in 2020–21 only 1% of all secondary school pupils studied it. Research has revealed that children from a low SES background have disproportionately less access to Latin and Greek study than their peers. Moreover, pupils from a disadvantaged background who have finished primary school and are moving to secondary school are encouraged to study Latin and ancient Greek far less than other children their age. This is not necessarily deliberate discrimination on anyone's part, but it reveals there are not only visible but actually mostly invisible social barriers which stop children from taking part in Latin and Greek (Bracke, 2023, pp. 4–8), impacting their later lives. Very often, indeed, access to ancient language study implies access to lower pupil–teacher ratios and more extensive school resources, with a higher likelihood of higher grades and access to (top) universities and better employment (Gerhards *et al.*, 2019; Merry and Boterman, 2020; Rombaut *et al.*, 2006, p. 6; Sawert, 2016).

The *Young Heroes* project aims to intervene in this discrimination and break down these barriers, where by pupils do not have access to Latin and Greek primarily because of their social background. And so I train my students to teach ancient Greek at primary school, since this is still a subject reserved for the linguistically brightest pupils in Flanders who have already studied Latin. At the start of the project, there are invariably teachers and pupils who say Greek will be too difficult, that it is not for them. By the end of the project, however, the large majority of pupils have invariably engaged positively with the lessons to some extent. By offering pupils a challenge at their own level, we want to make teachers *and* pupils aware of what pupils are capable of. As not everyone has equal access to Latin and ancient Greek, providing this access and giving children a voice in knowledge-creation about the ancient world gives them the option to develop an interest in the subject, and may also increase their wellbeing and academic self-esteem.

Language ideology and raciolinguistics in action

Content-wise, we keep a broad focus on both linguistic and cultural elements. As there are only ten teaching hours, we do not study much grammar with the pupils: instead, we build up children's Greek slowly from letter level to word, phrase, and eventually sentence level by means of weekly cultural themes which are explored through activities and exercises. In these, grammar (such as noun-adjective agreement, or the difference between nominative and accusative) is intrinsically integrated. In the 2023 course, for example, my university students chose to teach the story of the Trojan war. The students used the themes of heroism, war, gods, and women, in order to invite children to start thinking about, and indeed start questioning, the stories we tell each other and ourselves. Listening and speaking, reading and writing skills in ancient Greek are all developed in a complementary way. The children also do games and plays, dress up, and take part in arts and crafts activities. It is usually a lot of fun and the feedback we get from children at the end of the project is always highly positive.

However, underneath what seems like 'fun' for the pupils, is a clear awareness of the choices we make when teaching ancient languages, because language is not an ideologically neutral tool. Choices made in the language classroom are inevitably made on the basis of language ideologies, which, according to Woolard, 'endow some linguistic features or varieties with greater value than others [and] can turn some participants' practices into symbolic capital that brings social and economic rewards' (Woolard, 2020, pp. 1–2). In the Flemish region, for example, on account of historical struggles to validate the existence of the Flemish language and identity, the use of other languages in schools tends to be problematised or even prohibited. Not all 'other languages' are, however, considered equal. Ideologically, a juxtaposition is created between supposed prestige languages and plebeian languages:

while learning languages such as English and French is encouraged and validated, pupils' home languages such as Arabic or Turkish are considered a hindrance to learning Dutch. Raciolinguistic ideologies thus underlie educational stereotyping of specific languages, with real consequences for pupils. As Lourdes Ortega argues: 'Whenever the linguistic repertoires of certain speakers are rejected, their ethnocultural heritages and affiliations are also rejected' (Ortega, 2019, p. 30).

In *Young Heroes*, we therefore aim to empower children who are growing up in difficult circumstances through language learning – and not just any language but a 'classical' language still societally connected with an elevated social status. It is therefore important to reflect on our approach to language learning and its ramifications for children's development.

School language and silent languages

The primary schools where my university students teach are informed by the superdiversity of their pupils. Children from all over the world, with varying degrees of understanding of the formal school language, and with diverse linguistic backgrounds, are learning together in big groups. Most of these pupils are being brought up multilingually, and even pupils who officially only speak the formal school language in fact speak different registers or dialects outside of the classroom (Blommaert and Van Avermaet, 2008; Van den Branden and Verhelst, 2008). Many pupils have varying degrees of knowledge of different languages: they may, for example, speak them well but not be able to write in them. This issue is further exacerbated by a stark differentiation within multilingualism, namely between elite multilingualism (i.e. individuals learning new languages by choice), and grassroots multilingualism experienced by people being compelled to learn new languages because of geopolitical pressures such as war or climate change (Han, 2013; Ortega, 2019). In Flemish classrooms, in short, multilingualism rather than monolingualism is now the norm.

The standard approach when teaching Latin or ancient Greek is still, however, to consider the official school language as L1 (the native language, which a child grows up with), even if teachers may occasionally refer to other languages when discussing vocabulary or in exercises. An awareness of language ideologies, however, reveals that, as part of their learning process, all pupils in the classroom – regardless of their linguistic and cultural background – are in fact using not just the formal school language, but their entire linguistic repertoire to focus on learning ancient Greek. They are just doing this silently.

So from an emancipatory teaching approach we can question the use of a monolingual pedagogy when teaching an ancient language. The presence of silent (unacknowledged) language registers in the classroom indeed complicates the generally accepted notion that Latin and ancient Greek are great educational equalisers, as everyone starts from the same point. Is it possible to formulate an alternative to the monolingual approach, in the context of superdiverse class groups?

One alternative is the bilingual approach, found in projects such as Albert Baca's *Language Transfer Project* from the 1970s (George, 1998), or the current German secondary school project *Pons Latinus* (Grosse, 2017). Both use Latin as a bridge language between children's home language (respectively Spanish and Turkish) and the school language (respectively English and German). There too Latin is applied as an emancipatory tool to an end, namely cultural integration and increased self-confidence through linguistic improvement. I very much admire this approach and actually applied it myself while working in Wales, where we did so-called 'triple literacy' exercises connecting Latin with English and Welsh. In one exercise, for example, we asked pupils to answer questions about a passage from the Latin, English, and Welsh edition of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. Yet in superdiverse classrooms, with a variety of languages spoken by pupils at home, highlighting only two spoken languages is not inclusive.

Functional Multilingual Learning

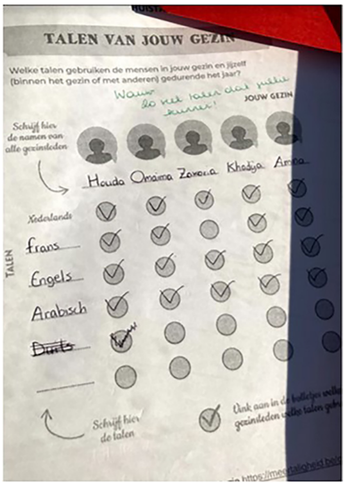
There is another approach. In Second Language Acquisition, recent decades have witnessed an increased focus on multilingual learning. There are different theories and approaches, but all focus on the need to utilise pupils' 'entire didactic capital' while learning a new language in school (Sierens and Van Avermaet, 2014, p. 204). Functional Multilingual Learning is a practical application of this approach: the term literally means that the use of multilingualism has to be functional. In this approach, pupils' 'linguistic abilities become an asset, a necessary tool in navigating the classroom discussion, as opposed to something that should be avoided' (Flores and García, 2013, p. 251). But how would this approach look in practice in the Latin or ancient Greek primary classroom?

Let me first say what Functional Multilingual Learning is *not* about (Sierens and Van Avermaet, 2014). It is not just referring to words from other languages when discussing the meaning or spelling of Latin or ancient Greek words, although that can certainly be part of it. It also does not mean anything goes in the classroom, and all languages can just be spoken whenever, or used instead of the school language in assessment. It is *not* about lowering standards. In specific exercises, however, the teacher can decide to activate pupils' full linguistic repertoire, rather than only what children believe is allowed, which might cause them to remain silent, hesitate, feel ashamed, or embarrassed, and hence progress slowly. This approach also emphasises the social practice of language: as the entire class group engages in it, group learning allows for non-dominant linguistic knowledge and practices to become visible.

So I would like to use Functional Multilingual Learning as a way for us to start querying or perhaps opening up the traditional monolingual approach, by rendering visible other languaging that pupils in a superdiverse classroom are doing silently while we are teaching them. Being aware of this does not require a huge change in didactic approach but rather a shift in our own awareness as teachers. Let us have a look at ways in which we might make this shift in our Latin or ancient Greek primary classroom.

An easy way to open up awareness about languaging in the classroom is to explore the linguistic backgrounds of your pupils. In settings with limited time (like my project), it may seem like an impossible task to start including discussions about languages other than the target language, but straightforward activities can immediately communicate to pupils that their linguistic repertoire is acknowledged and valued.

In our project we use the language passport created by Ghent City Council and the Ghent University Diversity and Learning Network.[11] At the end of the first lesson of all of our courses, pupils are given the language passport to fill in at home (see Figure 1). As you will see in the image, interestingly the person who filled in the form on the left first added German ('Duits') for one family member and then deleted it again at the bottom of the page, which suggests they did not feel they have all the skills in order to qualify



TALEN VAN JOUW GEZIN

Welke talen gebruiken de mensen in jouw gezin en jijzelf (binnen het gezin of met anderen) gedurende het jaar?

Wauw zo veel talen dat jullie kunnen!

JOUW GEZIN

Schrijf hier de namen van alle gezinsleden

TALEN

	Houda	Omaima	Zakaria	Khadija	Amina
Nederlands	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
frans	✓	✓	○	✓	✓
Engels	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Arabisch	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
~~Duits~~	✓	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○	○

Schrijf hier de talen

Vink aan in de bolletjes welk gezinsleden welke talen geb

Figure 1. The language passport.

for 'knowing' the language, even though some knowledge of German is clearly present in the household in some way.

By means of this homework, pupils are implicitly encouraged to communicate with their family members about their languages, which starts up a constructive discussion about language learning and knowledge not only in the classroom but also at home. In the next lesson, the language passports of pupils are then discussed: pupils are e.g. asked about languages they were unaware of in their family, and what they consider to be 'knowing' languages. Does it mean speaking or writing them perfectly? How do they use their languages when learning? Asking these questions and starting letting this conversation run through the course renders multilingualism visible in the classroom and lends equal authority and value to all languages.

Research suggests that the use of home languages can also play a beneficial role in classroom activities when used functionally, e.g. group work, individual internet research, reading a poem or text in class, … without it diminishing pupils' engagement with the school or target language (Jordens, 2016). However, it is key that teachers do not leave pupils to get on with using different languages without their guidance (Sierens and Van Avermaet, 2014, p. 277). In individual or group exercises, they should provide support in the school language and target language (Latin or ancient Greek in our case, at the appropriate level), reiterating, confirming, clarifying, or correcting where necessary. Finding out where pupils are using their home languages in exercises can clarify for the teacher where the gaps in their knowledge are, and how they may be addressed. A common worry by teachers is that they do not speak all of the languages of the pupils, and so can't ascertain whether a pupil has understood. But as Functional Multilingual Learning aims to (1) give visibility to pupils' silent multilingual learning, (2) find ways to support them in a more targeted way by understanding gaps in their knowledge, and (3) develop group knowledge of each other's languages and identities thereby improving pupils' wellbeing, it becomes clear teachers do not need to know all of their pupils' languages.

One of the key activities in the *Young Heroes* course is an exercise in which pupils (in small groups) connect words for family connections (father, mother, child, …) in various Western European languages, and add the respective words from their own home languages in a final column. The whole class then discusses differences and parallels between languages. Before this exercise which takes place in lesson 3, pupils tend to be cautious about using home languages, and they tend to start this exercise with hesitation; however, they find their curiosity activated as they go on. This exercise fascinates me because every year and for every group we work with, it turns out to be a catalyst (even this year in a class group with bullying and factions). Pupils' hesitation about using home languages and about their linguistic capacities (also for Greek) slowly makes way for excitement and openness (Bracke, 2023, pp. 53–55).

These are just a few examples from *Young Heroes* which demonstrate how home languages can be brought into the primary Latin or ancient Greek classroom for emancipatory purposes. I am excited by other potential applications of this approach, such as group work in which pupils can use their own languages for some parts and then use the school language and Greek in other parts; exercises in which pupils may compile ancient Greek word lists in their own language, and others. It is of course important to set guidelines and boundaries, as the use of home languages must be used functionally in specific exercises or activities, but not necessarily in assessment (unless specifically designed by the teacher). This is not as straightforward as it sounds. My university students have in the past told pupils they were allowed to use their home languages while discussing certain activities. But, of course, if school policy on the whole has not encouraged it, fear of breaking rules (even implicit societal rules, e.g. regarding the need for Dutch immersion) can lead to hesitation and a timid attitude. So multilingual learning has to be considered part of an emancipatory process, for pupils as well as the teacher.

Successes and challenges

From my own observations, from my university students' experience, and from school pupils' feedback year upon year, it is clear that including home languages – whether through a bilingual or multilingual approach – in Latin or ancient Greek primary lessons functionally can offer an emancipatory experience for pupils, which allows them to start reflecting on their linguistic identity, and increases their wellbeing in class. This is confirmed by research from other school subject areas which find improvements in pupils' wellbeing and academic achievements (Jaspers, 2017; Lemmi, 2019; Moodley, 2007; Peterson and Heywood, 2007; Ramaut *et al.*, 2013; Rosiers *et al.*, 2016), as well as an improvement in pupils' understanding of each other (Genesee and Gándara, 1999; Wright and Tropp, 2005).

Yet allowing home languages into the classroom also brings out tensions that may have remained hidden in the learning process. I said earlier we have a lot of fun in our lessons and we do, but my students do teach in difficult circumstances. Any class group can have reasons for not getting along, but in superdiverse classrooms, pupils' own raciolinguistic ideologies can add to difficulties.

A few years ago, when we were discussing home languages and one child mentioned Kurdish, another child shouted out that Kurdish is not a language, and that, since Kurds do not have a country, they do not have the right to exist (Bracke, 2023, p. 65). More recently, when discussing different languages and the French word *fils* ('son'), one of the boys in the class loudly cursed *fils de p* … ('son of a …'). These are instances of discriminatory language use and pupils using this register must be told in no unclear terms that this is not acceptable. However, pupils' language use has been shaped by their circumstances and the language ideologies around them. When they use discriminatory language, they may do so to claim control over a world in which they are themselves marginalised, by attacking those who are in an equally weak or weaker position. These are challenging moments for teachers, but emancipatory learning has to make space for rare painful moments such as these (Bracke, 2023, p. 65). It is vital to set clear boundaries, but by also encouraging pupils who are feeling unheard and are potentially lashing out, to use their home languages constructively and functionally, as a teacher we can give them a voice in a knowledge-creation system from which they are traditionally excluded. In that way, their voices are acknowledged and we can hopefully encourage them to find more constructive ways of being heard.[12] The book I have recently published about my experience teaching primary school Latin and ancient Greek – *Classics at primary school: A tool for social justice* (Bracke, 2023) – provides more information about this approach to inclusive Latin and ancient Greek teaching which I have developed in the past 12 years.[13]

Conclusion: local approaches to international socio-educational issues

It may seem odd that I started this article by proposing the need for local approaches to international socio-educational challenges, yet then continued to provide a Functional Multilingual Framework as a way forward. I want to clarify that this is, for me, merely a way to open up the discussion about what we want 'Classics' to mean for our 21st-century pupils. The superdiverse low-SES school groups which my university students teach are not the same as the Marseilles pupils taught in the *Nausicaä* projects, the girls targeted by Eleni Bozia's project in the US, or the *Elliniki Agogi* project in Greece, all described further in this issue.

However, I would argue that, if we want to make ancient language teaching available for all pupils, it is important not merely to think about introducing Latin or ancient Greek to pupils, because then they enter the same value system which has traditionally excluded them. We must also consider how we may give them a voice in the classroom. Part of this reflection process entails reformulating how we define languages and how we teach them, which includes reformulating the relationship of classical languages to modern languages. Reflecting on the choices we make when we bring Latin or ancient Greek learning into the primary classroom (based on our personal language ideology) when teaching any children allows us to ensure we are making conscious choices in the classroom.

As my case study from the Flemish region in Belgium has revealed, in a superdiverse classroom, applying Functional Multilingual Learning can encourage primary school pupils to use their full linguistic repertoire when learning Latin or ancient Greek, and have an emancipatory effect. In different contexts, other approaches may be more successful. To return to the start of this article, understanding the local context of pupils is vitally important, as it is from that context – and from pupils' needs which arise in that particular context – that we can support them during their educational trajectory. In this way, our subject area may become a valuable tool in educating the 21st-century generations. The following articles in this issue provide further examples of current local practices and approaches to Latin and ancient Greek teaching, which – when read alongside each other – provide a kaleidoscope of didactic practices, experiences, and challenges which together, may help to support the international forum we set out to create with our conference.

Notes

1 All talks, powerpoints, and handouts may be accessed through the Euroclassica website: https://www.euroclassica.eu/portale/euroclassica/links/courses-didactics/latin-greek-at-primary-school.html.
2 See www.paideiainstitute.org/aequora.
3 See https://ch.hypotheses.org/6111 and Duchemin *et al.* in this issue.
4 See https://classicsforall.org.uk/ and Hunt in this issue.
5 See www.ancientgreeksyoungheroes.ugent.be. See below in this chapter.
6 See n. 1.
7 Except in England and Wales where Latin and Ancient Greek may be taught at primary school level, and charities such as Classics for All and the Classical Association provide much-needed financial support which ensures long-term sustainability. See Bracke (2023, p. 26).
8 The rest of this article is based on the presentation I gave at the 2023 Classical Association Conference in Cambridge. My thanks go to the organisers of the panel on emancipatory didactic approaches in which I spoke – Fiona McHardy and Effie Kostara – and the audience for their thoughtful questions.
9 See www.literacythroughclassics.weebly.com.
10 See n. 5.
11 See https://meertaligheid.be/content/4-onderzoek/talenpaspoort-gezin.pdf.
12 On interethnic issues in translanguaging projects, see Charalambous *et al.* (2016).
13 See Richardi (2023) for a useful review of the book.

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