

'Gifted Girls and Groovy Greek'

Classical Greek as an enrichment activity for Gifted and Talented Girls – A Case Study – Arlene Holmes-Henderson

'GREEK IS USUALLY begun by a still more select few ... The general feeling is that a sound basis in Latin, gained in two years or so of successful and progressive work should underlie the beginnings of Greek.' (Ministry of Education Pamphlet: 1959)

'Newly started courses in Greek are quite numerous' (Baty: 1962). Whilst this may have been the case in 1962, it is certainly not the case today. Of the 941 pupils taking Greek GCSE in 2004, only 12% were from state schools. At A Level, only 7% of Classical Greek candidates were from state schools. At GCSE and at A Level, grammar schools present 60% of the State school candidates for the subject.

The School

As a Classics PGCE student in a girls' state maintained grammar school in South-east England, I undertook (from February – April 2006) a small piece of educational research investigating the value of Classical Greek as an extension and enrichment activity for gifted and talented girls in years 10-13. This article is a summary of the research and refers only to the Year 12/13 set.

At this school (which, in recent years, featured in the top five schools nationally for GCSE and A Level results and in 2005, 100% of pupils got grades A*-C in five or more GCSEs), all pupils studied

Latin in Year 8 and then chose in Year 9 whether to continue with the subject to GCSE (about 25% of the year-group usually continued). Greek was not offered at all, hence the initiation of this study.

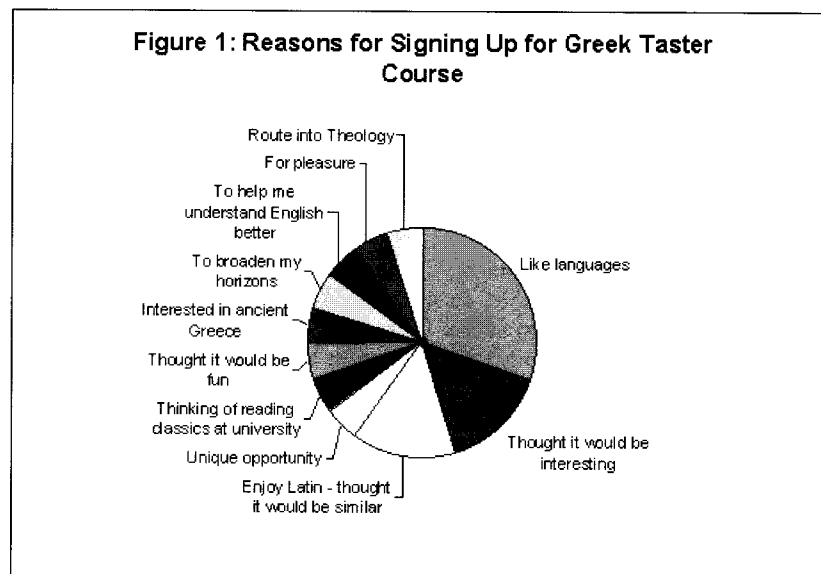
The taster course

The group of nine Year 12/13 'gifted and talented pupils' opted to attend a 30 minute Greek lesson during a lunchtime once a week for ten weeks. During that period, they studied the alphabet, transliteration, the definite article and completed four chapters of *A New Greek Course for Schools* (which teaches Greek through cartoons).

A variety of strategies was employed in the teaching of Classical Greek as a taster course; whole-class teaching, individual work, group work, oral translation, written translation, the balance between Greek history/civilisation and language work, pupil-led sessions, rewards for rote learning and learning through visual material.

Reasons for sign-up

At the start of session 1, I distributed a questionnaire. Question 1 asks, 'Why did you sign up for this taster course in Classical Greek?'. The responses to this question can be seen in the pie chart below.

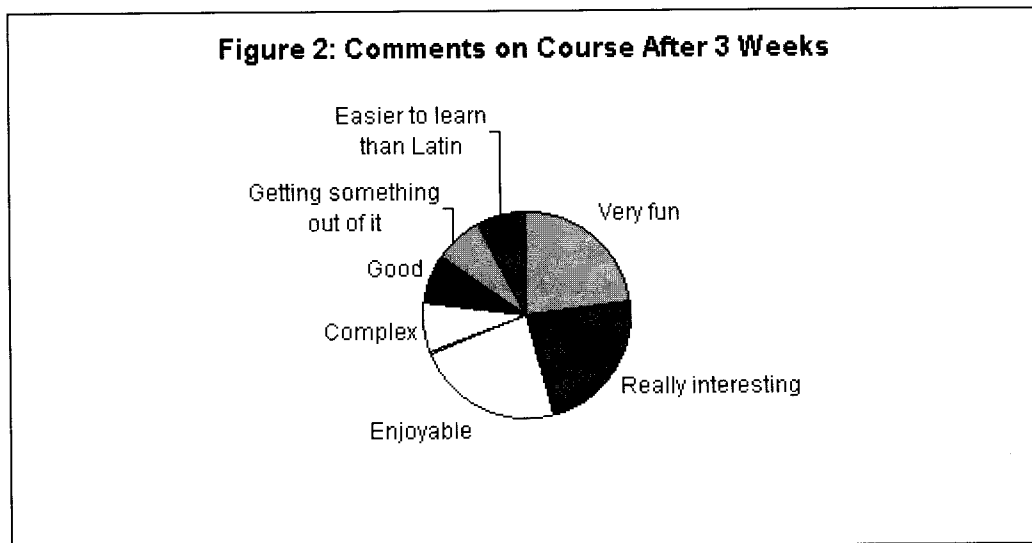


The early weeks were spent learning the alphabet and practising pronunciation. The linguistic ability of these pupils was clear from week 3 (they had all chosen to do AS or A level Latin): they were able to 'think around' the Greek i.e. not just look for a direct translation into English, but instead say, 'well monos doesn't really mean anything in English, but it might be part of monotone or monologue, which is something done by 1 person or thing'.

3 week review

At the end of this linguistic session, I asked the students to complete a '3 week review' questionnaire. In response to the question: 'Are you pleased you signed up for Classical Greek?', all nine pupils answered 'Yes', three with exclamation marks and three with smiley faces.

Figure 2 shows the comments made by the students in response to the question 'What do you think of the course so far?':



Study of Greek Civilisation

The focus in week 6 was Greek civilisation. I photocopied stories (in English) about the elopement of Helen, the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon and Greek mythology.

'The responsibility remains with the teacher to illumine the study of the language and literature by recreating from every resource available to him the civilisation in which they flourished.' (Ministry of Education's pamphlet, *Suggestions for the Teaching of Classics 1959:46*).

A further questionnaire was distributed at the end of the civilisation lesson. The results from, 'What did you think about reading background information on Greek literature, in English, in class?' were inconclusive.

- *I thought it was good as it helped me understand the background to the story we were reading in Greek.*
- *It was okay.*
- *Didn't get to read very much of it. Seems interesting, but prefer the cartoons.*
- *I think we would be better served to just be given info to read at home. You cannot learn Greek at home.*

Again, the responses to the later question, 'In future lessons, would you like to concentrate on learning Greek or continue with some background information?' were mixed:

50% of students desired 'a bit of both - because translating and background info are both interesting and can go hand in hand.' (to quote one response).

50% of students replied 'Translating, please'.

All students were very positive about the material used for the course (What do you think of reading Greek through cartoons?):

- *They are funny and not too hard.*
- *Breaks up the text a bit and makes me happy ☺*
- *Fun- better than reading more difficult literature at this stage.*
- *I think it is both fun and effective.*
- *Very amusing and bitesize.*
- *Greek is groovy!*
- *I love it.*

It was reassuring at this stage in the course to know that the pace and content were appropriate to the group and the context: 'Are your aims/desires at the start of the course being fulfilled? Please explain your answer.'

- *Yes - I recognise the alphabet, can translate some Greek and am enjoying it. (underlining original)*
- *I think so, although it is a shame it's only 30 mins a week so it is harder to progress.*
- *I aimed to do something a bit different and hoped to enjoy it - so I believe I am fulfilling this aim.*
- *Yes, because I am grasping the skeleton of the language.*
- *Yes because I can now read Greek (without understanding it!) and can translate some words. I have also learned more about Ancient Greece.*

By this stage in the course (6 weeks/3 hours of Greek), 83% of respondents felt that they could recite the definite article and recognise/translate the present tense of the verbs 'to be' and 'to have', so it is not true to say that the learning of grammar had been excluded from the taster course.

Timing

I asked the Greek students what they thought of 30 minutes for a Taster course. Below is a summary of the responses:

- '30 minutes is adequate- nice that it is fairly short' (4 other similar responses)
- 'It is adequate you don't lose concentration'
- 'Maybe an hour would be better as we get further into the course' (1 other similar response)
- 'It's ok, but much more can be achieved and consolidated in an hour'

Thus the majority of students were happy with the 30 minute sessions, giving them an opportunity to eat lunch outside the classroom. It is reassuring to know, however, that if the time came to 'step up a gear' with the language (perhaps to GCSE) there may not be widespread resistance!

Recommendations for Gifted and Talented provision

Kirby (1996: 23) states that to support the able pupil, schools should:

- Set targets that encourage pupils with special abilities to work to their potential.
- Identify and promote talent through the organisation of the curriculum, methods of delivery, and the attitudes and values of pupils and staff.
- Remove obstacles which prevent able pupils making full use of their talents.
- Allow pupils with special ability to progress in a way appropriate to their development.
- Encourage the expression of special ability and to offer appropriate guidance and support.
- Help pupils with special ability to recognise and benefit from their talent.

Latin has, for some time, been successfully offered in many comprehensive schools as part of the gifted and talented extra-curricular activity program designed to address and fulfil some of Kirby's suggestions.

'Already Latin is being taught to 'high-flying' students in some areas within the enrichment and extension programmes provided under the auspices of the government's scheme for the 'gifted and talented' part in its Excellence in the Cities Initiative...Classics is certainly finding a place as a part of this offering, although this may re-inforce the stereotype of classics as a particularly elitist subject.'
(Gibb in Morwood 2003:36)

Classics may well be viewed by some as an elitist subject, but this image may be lessened by its inclusion in the recommendations from the *Breadth and Balance in the Curriculum* conference (Hadman in 1997:23).

'In secondary schools, all students should become linguistically aware. For example, all schools could teach two languages that use different alphabets or characters and also teach the roots of European languages through Latin and Classical Greek. Second languages should be from a different language group, preferably in a non-Latin alphabet. There should indeed be a national plan for languages that reaches beyond the school curriculum.'

I believe that Classical Greek fills this void rather satisfactorily. Given the success of Latin as an extra-curricular activity for gifted and talented pupils, it seems that Classical Greek could be at least as successful, if not more so.

'It is true that Greek is offered in the first place to an untypically able minority.' (Taylor in Morwood 2003)

This small study did indeed deal with the 'untypically able minority' and was, by all accounts, highly successful. It is difficult to predict how successful a course of the same structure would be with less able linguists. But surely a study of Ancient Greek civilisation, history, politics or art would stimulate the minds of the gifted and talented, whether they studied the Greek language or not?

Conclusion

The fact that six out of the nine students subsequently attended a Greek summer school 200 miles from home suggests, I think, that the teaching of Classical Greek, off-timetable, *ab initio* initiated a:

'significant, measurable improvement in the attainment, aspirations, motivation and self-esteem of gifted and talented pupils and students, especially those at risk of underachieving, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds.'
(http://ygt.dcsf.gov.uk/FileLinks/312_DFES%20identification%20ocument.pdf accessed 07/01/2008)

With the future of Classical Greek now uncertain in Scottish schools (suffering from the SQA's 'low uptake policy'), I would encourage teachers across the UK, in the strongest possible terms, to 'give Greek a go', to help safeguard our subject and to spread the excitement, enjoyment and value that the study of Greek offers.

Works referred to in the text:

Baty, C.W. (1962) *Classics in the schools: a Survey of the Position and Prospects*, in 'Re-appraisal', *Supplement to Greece and Rome* vol. IX, No.1, London

HMSO, (1959) *Suggestions for the Teaching of Classics*, Ministry of Education Pamphlet No. 37, London

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Williams, W.A. (1984) *A New Greek Course for Schools Book 1* (Revised Edition), Glasgow

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