

Teaching the Classical Languages in a Changing Europe: Aims and Methods

Part I

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1. Introduction

The following report (*Part I*) contains:

- A survey of the conditions under which the classical languages Latin and Greek are taught in Europe at the beginning of the twenty-first century.
- A discussion of what concrete goals teaching of Latin and Greek today, in particular on an elementary level, should aim at in today's schools and universities.

Part II of the report (to be published separately) will contain:

- A presentation of a number of new teaching methods, mainly such as are based on computer technology, for teaching classical languages.

The report is, to a great extent, based on previous work done by Nicoletta Natalucci.¹ The supplementary material added by the two compilers mostly concerns their own experiences from many years of teaching Greek at schools and universities in Sweden and Denmark, plus their acquaintance with the didactic and pedagogical situations prevailing in the Scandinavian countries. The report concerns teaching of both Latin and Greek; however, since the authors are Hellenists (although they have experience of teaching Latin as well), Greek will get more attention than Latin in the following. Yet we are confident that experiences from teaching of Greek are mostly relevant for Latin as well and, when

¹ Nicoletta Natalucci, *Mondo classico e mondo moderno. Introduzione alla didattica e allo studio delle discipline classiche*, Perugia 2002 (Università degli studi di Perugia. Quaderni del Dipartimento di filologia e tradizione greca e latina. 3); 'Didattica delle lingue classiche: un "nuovo methodo grammaticale"?', *Euphrosyne* (Lisboa) 32, 2004, 453–472.

they may be suspected of being irrelevant or not evidently relevant, that will be indicated in the following.

2. Changing conditions

In previous centuries, the teaching of Latin and Greek in universities and schools of Europe aimed at making the students able to use the two classical languages as ordinary means of communication in certain contexts. Greek and, in particular, Latin were used for a number of practical purposes for which the vernaculars were, or were supposed to be, unsuitable: international contacts, academic teaching, learned publications, literary creations. Proficiency in Latin and Greek was achieved by learning a set of grammatical rules and a usable vocabulary, through practical training in text production and by imitation of a number of canonized prototypes. In particular this last point deserves highlighting. The concept of ‘classical’, which has played, and still plays, an important role for the European understanding of the ancient culture, owes its dominance to the fact that certain authors, texts or periods were singled out as patterns worthy of imitation and, provided with the hallmark ‘classical’, were selected for study, whereas other products of antiquity were neglected or even repudiated as inferior in quality in comparison to the classical items.

This situation gradually changed, and with the close of the nineteenth century the role of the classical languages in the education systems of most European countries had become a different one. Latin and Greek were no longer used for practical purposes, but their functions as literary and scholarly media or as vehicles of international communication had been taken over by the vernaculars, some of which were also used for communication beyond their natural frontiers.

With their practical use dwindling or completely vanishing, the study of Latin and Greek could no longer be motivated from their usefulness as tools of communication; knowledge of Latin and Greek was indispensable only for those who wanted to study the textual remains of antiquity in their original linguistic form; the classical languages retained their significance only for the study of an essential period in European history, whereas, seen from the view-point of the needs of contemporary society, they no longer are regarded as having any other practical functions.²

Conclusion: Teaching of the classical languages today should aim at making the students able to read and understand the ancient texts and to use them as sources for a deeper understanding of the ancient civilization and the impact of that civilization on later periods of European and global history. The production of texts of their own in Latin or Greek is of negligible interest to students of today.

² Here we disregard the claim — correct, in our view — that the study of, e.g., Latin may make the learning of other languages easier, either because the study of Latin involves training in grammatical analysis or because a considerable portion of the vocabulary of a number of European languages is of Latin origin. Also, for historical linguistics and for general linguistic theory, knowledge of the classical languages will be of importance.

Other relevant circumstances:

— Latin and, in particular, Greek are no longer taught as before in the schools. Teaching of elementary Greek and Latin has in many countries become an assignment for the universities. This means that the students are more mature than before; they are capable of more independent reflection on linguistic and other matters, they are committed to their studies. But they also demand more, in terms of efficiency and relevance, from their teachers, from the text-books and from other teaching tools. A declaration like “the demands of pedagogical clarity have at times led me to take liberties with philological truth”³ could possibly be accepted in a text-book intended for schoolboys in certain educational systems. The mature and adult students of European universities of today will deem otherwise. They demand both truth and clarity and have the right to expect their teachers to be able to make even complex phenomena clear to their audience.

— Greek and Latin may be studied independent of each other. In schools of earlier times, the students normally started with Latin and then, after a few years, went on to Greek. The teacher of Greek could be confident that the students, when they started their Greek studies, had a basic knowledge of grammar and some acquaintance with a language with a similar syntactic structure. This is no longer the case. Although ‘classics’ or ‘classical philology’, including both Greek and Latin, is still offered in many universities, the tendency is to separate the two languages as two distinct academic disciplines. This means that teachers of Greek have to take up more elementary matters in their teaching; the advantage is that Greek can be taught without the burden of Latin grammar.

— Time is short. Students should proceed from elementary language studies to the reading of original texts as soon as possible. As an example we cite the organisation of Greek studies in Swedish universities: the elementary course takes ten weeks, and after that original works by Xenophon and Plato are introduced; they are of course studied in school editions, with ample commentaries and with word-lists specially made for the purpose, but the essential fact is that original texts are introduced at an early stage. Thus, the pedagogical situation demands a short, efficient course in elementary Greek or Latin and an early introduction of original texts.

— The focus of interest is no longer exclusively on the so-called classical periods in Greek and Roman history and on texts produced during those periods. Medieval Latin and Neo-Latin are studied for their own sake. On the Greek side, the Hellenistic and Roman periods are more and more coming into focus. Byzantinology is an independent discipline in many places, but a future byzantinologist typically starts his/her studies with an elementary course in Greek. Greek is still a living language, Modern Greek is an academic discipline of its own, but its ties to the ancient language are evident and many students feel it natural (or are encouraged) to take courses in both classical and modern Greek.

³ The quotation is from the preface (p. v) of James Morwood, *The Oxford Grammar of Classical Greek*, Oxford 2001.

— Greek and Latin are taught in all countries belonging to the European Union. It is essential that every student, on the elementary level of the studies, should have access to text-books and other teaching tools in his/her own language. This is no problem in countries where the major European languages are spoken. In areas with “less spoken and less taught” languages, on the other hand, there do not always exist adequate teaching tools in the area’s own language. The reason is, in most cases, simply that the number of presumptive buyers is not large enough to make the production of teaching tools commercially defensible. As a consequence foreign (in the first place, Anglophone) books are used. In the Scandinavian countries, for example, the text-books produced under the auspices of JACT and similar books⁴ have sometimes been used for elementary courses in Latin and Greek. This is not an ideal situation. Learning becomes unnecessarily complicated and, consequently, inefficient if the student is to learn a foreign language via another foreign language, and text-books produced in UK are not always suitable for the pedagogical situation in other countries.⁵ Therefore, it is highly desirable that there exist teaching tools in every European language for elementary courses in Greek and Latin.

3. Who are the students?

For what reason would a student choose to study Greek or Latin? What would be his/her intention with those studies? How much time will s/he or be prepared to devote to the study of one of the classical languages, or to both?

It is possible to distinguish three groups of presumptive students:

1. Those who, in the future, will be the researchers and teachers of the classical languages on university level. From them will be demanded a very high degree of knowledge of the respective language, plus knowledge of a more general sort of, e.g., linguistics, literary theory, classical archaeology. University teachers of New Testament exegesis should also be included in this group.
2. Students, who in their future career will use their knowledge of Latin and Greek as tools for carrying out their daily work, e.g. teachers in schools, priests or academics in historical disciplines with focus on ancient periods (including certain theological disciplines, e.g. patristics). These people will also need a relatively high degree of knowledge of the languages. They must be able to use extant dictionaries, grammars and commentaries and to be able to assess the quality of existing translations of the ancient texts.
3. Students who take Greek and Latin, not as their prime subjects, but as an aid or as a supplement to studies in other disciplines. Such disciplines are:

⁴ *The Joint Association of Classical Teachers’ Greek Course: Reading Greek*, Cambridge University Press 1978 (reprinted repeatedly); P.V. Jones & K.C. Sidwell, *Reading Latin*, Cambridge University Press 1986 (also with several reprints).

⁵ Speakers of the smaller European languages may also have reason to contest the dominance of English.

philosophy
history of ideas
literature
linguistics
modern languages (Latin is of course especially relevant for students of Romance languages)
classical archaeology (including art history)
history (both antiquity and later periods for which sources in Latin and/or Greek are relevant)

To these groups we should add people who take courses in the classical languages because of an interest in ancient history, classical civilization and its impact on later periods.

Students belonging to this third group will need some sort of basic training in the languages. In their future careers they will probably read the ancient texts in translation, but they will have so much knowledge that they are capable of using texts in the original languages when they feel the need to do so, to use dictionaries and to understand grammatical comments on the texts.

Thus, the students who take an elementary course in one of the classical languages will be a heterogeneous crowd. Their aims with the studies will be widely different, and in smaller universities it will not be possible to offer separate courses according to the interests of the students. This is a factor that must be kept in mind when elementary courses are constructed: they must be intended to provide skills and experiences that are relevant to all or most of these potential groups of students.

4. Specialized courses for particular student groups?

What was said in the last lines of the preceding section does not mean that specialized courses do not exist. Theological faculties offer, probably more often than not, specialized courses in New Testament Greek, mostly for students without previous knowledge of the language, and there exist a great number of elementary text-books written especially for such courses.⁶ The theological faculties are not always kindly disposed to the co-operation of classicists in the teaching of their students. The text-book mentioned in the last footnote was written by a classicist, but for many years the theologians of his own university declined hiring classicists for teaching their courses in New Testament Greek, the (alleged?) reason being that a classicist would not be able to teach theology, and theology

⁶ One example among many: Jerker Blomqvist, *Lärobok i grekiska för teologiska studier*, Lund 1970; second edition 1971. It was reprinted several times and in 1993 re-edited in a modernized version as *Grekiska för teologer. En introduktion*. It is still used all over Scandinavia, and there exists a Finnish translation (*Johdatus Uuden testamentin kreikan*. Suomeksi toimittanut Aarne Toivanen, Helsinki 1974 (several reprints)).

it must be, even in an elementary Greek course. But times are changing, and Lund university is now planning to introduce a course of elementary Greek that is intended for students from both the faculties, Humanities and Theology.

The compilers of this report are also acquainted with specialized courses for (postgraduate) students of philosophy. Such courses have previously been offered at the universities of Lund and Copenhagen, and are now on the program at Södertörn University College (*Södertörns Högskola*) in Sweden. Text-books were produced especially for these courses.⁷

5. What to learn?

Learning classical languages once meant memorizing a great number of paradigms. Students were supposed to be able to reel off sequences such as

mensa
mensae
mensae
mensam
mensā
mensa

or

pello, pepuli, pulsum, pellere

without wavering a fraction of a second. Young students did not always see the meaning with this,⁸ but it is of course true that, when you were to produce Latin and Greek texts of your own, it was very practical, not to say indispensable, to have such memorized morphological sequences ready at hand. The aim of teaching classical languages today is no longer the active mastering of the languages for producing new texts but the capability to interpret the texts that have been inherited from antiquity.⁹ This means that learning by heart is no longer of prime relevance for students of classical languages and, more generally speaking, the pedagogical theories prevalent today do, on the whole, not favour memorization as an element of the learning process.

However, any sort of understanding a text presupposes that you possess a knowledge of certain elements of the language in which it is written. Knowledge of a number of words, the normal morphology and the principal rules of syntax must be learnt beforehand. Looking up every word in the dictionary and identifying every form with the

⁷ Sten Ebbesen, *Filosofigræsk. Del 1: Tekster of øvelser; Del 2: Grammatik & glossar*, København 1982. Jerker Blomqvist, *Grekiska för filosofer. En introduktion*, Lund 1997 (repr. 2002, 2005).

⁸ Winston Churchill's scepticism towards the utility of the vocative of *mensa* is a wellknown illustration.

⁹ One consequence of the focussing on the ancient text is that even the most elementary text-books published today strive to use only original texts as a basis for the teaching. A recent example: Frank Beetham, *Learning Greek With Plato*, Bristol: Phoenix Press (to be published in January 2006).

aid of a grammar is a very time-consuming process. A basic vocabulary and a working familiarity with the regular morphology help the student very much. No living person is likely to master all details of a classical language (or any other language), so that is not an ideal to strive for, but a basic knowledge is necessary.

The question is however: How much should a student be supposed to learn? How many words should s/he know, how many of the word forms should s/he be able to identify without hesitation? One answer is of course: The more, the better. But, in the pedagogical practice, when defining the limits it is necessary to consider the fact that the time that teachers and students have at their disposal is limited. Therefore it is mandatory to set a realistic limit and to concentrate the effort on learning what is most relevant, i.e. what is most useful to the student who tries to understand a Latin or Greek original texts.

In our view, the mastering of morphology is of prime importance and, even if Latin and especially Greek morphology may seem terrifyingly complex to the beginner, it is, after all, limited in compass and can be learnt in a limited period of time. Vocabulary comes second, but the number of words to be learnt must be selected according to their relevance. Syntax is important, too, since the structure of the classical languages differs so much from that of the average modern European language, but learning syntactical rules by heart serves no practical purpose, but the syntactical insights are to be integrated with the learner while s/he works with the texts.

At Lund University, when producing new curricula for the elementary courses in Greek, we made the attempt to define the extent of knowledge a student should be supposed to have acquired after passing those courses. We quote the result we arrived at. After the first half year of full-time study this is what we expect the student to have acquired:

passive but comprehensive and secure knowledge of classical Attic morphology
some elementary knowledge of syntax
a passive vocabulary of c. 1,500 words
capacity to interpret the texts set for examination¹⁰ independently and to explain them grammatically

After another semester the students should have acquainted themselves with Greek poetry and drama and got a certain training in interpreting such texts. Apart from that the following linguistic competence is specified:

active mastering of standard Attic morphology
knowledge of historical phonetics sufficient to explain the development of Attic and Homeric word forms
knowledge of standard Attic syntax and a general orientation on syntactical phenomena sufficient for an understanding of divergences from the standard in poetical syntax

¹⁰ These texts are selections from Xenophon and Plato (c. 80 pages).

elementary knowledge of Greek stylistics
a passive (Greek–Swedish) vocabulary of 2,000 words
an active (Swedish–Greek) vocabulary of 400 words
some experience of translating from Swedish into Greek

We may observe that, when the curriculum requires active mastering of morphology, an active Greek vocabulary (albeit limited) and a certain ability to translate into Greek, these are requirements that have been inherited from a time when the ultimate aim of classical studies was to teach the students to express themselves in Latin and Greek. However, since it is assumed that active production of texts in Greek will lead to a better understanding of the language, translation training is still part of the curriculum, although its relevance has been questioned.

The passive vocabulary has been set at 2,000 words after one year. This is a problematic requirement, since the relevance and functionality of a vocabulary of that dimension has not been demonstrated. We refer to the special study on vocabulary learning that was presented, in a preliminary version, at the ULISSE meeting in Brussels in January 2006 and will be made available, in its definite version, on the ULISSE project's web-site.

With the two qualifications made here we think that these requirements are realistic; the students have a good chance to achieve the goals set by the curricula in the allotted time of one year, and the knowledge of Greek that they have acquired will be useful to them, whether they conclude their studies after the first year or continue to higher levels.