

Greek courses on the web – Who will benefit and why?

Teaching ancient Greek today makes us look for new approaches to the old material, like courses on the web. To me the vital point is the dialogue with the students, in all kinds of education, not least distance education. What the students doing distance courses are likely to miss very much, viz. the presence of the teacher, is something you have to make up for by intensifying the dialogue and the contacts with the students: the face-to-face dialogue of the classroom is to be replaced by the interactive dialogue of the course on the web. On this point, you will get courses on the web into perspective, if you differentiate, thinking in terms of morphological and syntactical features, between learning separate items like inflections and, on the other hand, understanding how the items fit together in clauses and sentences. I will give some examples from my Greek course on the web, one of the distance courses at Uppsala University.

By clicking on the verbs in the Greek sentences in the training texts of the course, consisting of 30 lessons, you get an identification of the form, like this (for παιδεύει from the sentence “Ὁμηρος τοὺς ἀνθρώπους παιδεύει in lesson 2):

It is a verb,
third person singular
in the present indicative active.
The first person singular is παιδεύω
meaning “educate”.

And then you get the inflection of the present indicative active of λέγω, the paradigm in the grammatical section of this lesson.

In this way, by clicking on the verbs in the training texts, gradually the students learn to recognize the different verb forms. They should also, of course,

memorize the inflections, but there is no way of checking how far they actually do this, as opposed to the classroom, where you can check from time to time by asking the students to repeat this or that inflection.

The same goes for the declension. By clicking on the substantives in the Greek sentences in the training texts, you get an identification of the form, like this (for *μύθους* from the sentence *μύθους τοῖς ἀνθρώποις λέγει* in lesson 2):

It is a masculine substantive

in the accusative plural.

The nominative singularis is *μῦθος*

meaning “tale”, “story”, “myth”.

And then you get the inflection of *δῆμος*, the paradigm in the grammatical section of this lesson.

Like this, by clicking on the substantives in the training texts, gradually the students learn to recognize the different forms of the substantives. To be sure, they are also requested to memorize the inflections, although, as opposed to the classroom situation, there is indeed no way of telling how far they actually do so.

However, the main focus must be on the students’ understanding of how the parts of speech fit together. On this point a real dialogue can start. To begin with, students should learn to focus on the finite verb, the predicate, and on the subject. By clicking on the number of a sentence in the Greek training texts, you get a commentary on the syntactical structure of the sentence, like this (on the sentence *Ὅμηρος τοὺς ἀνθρώπους παιδεύει* in lesson 2):

The subject is *Ὅμηρος*: the subject is in the nominative!

The predicate is *παιδεύει*: the predicate agrees with its subject in number and person.

τοὺς ἀνθρώπους is the accusative (direct) object.

Like this, basic facts and phenomena of Greek syntax are repeated and emphasized again and again throughout the commentaries on the Greek sentences in this lesson and in subsequent lessons, the commentaries, of course, getting more detailed as the sentences of the training texts are getting more complicated.

Then, translation exercises (from Swedish into Greek), from lesson 5 onwards, put the students to the test. In lesson 9, for instance, the students are to translate six Swedish sentences into Greek and they are requested, this time, to use a participle instead of the subordinate clause in Swedish. They get a short word-list (Swedish-Greek) to make use of when translating. The young man in the word-list, ὁ νέος, and the girl, ἡ παρθένος, appear as subject, direct object and indirect object in the sentences, and so the case must be adapted accordingly.

The students submit their translation exercises, by email and attachment, for correction. What is trained and tested by the exercises is the students' ability to analyse sentences and their understanding of Greek. Now the learning process turns into a dialogue: the students submit their exercises for correction, asking questions (and getting answers) about how to construe and construct the sentences. A dialogue gets under way that may be more instructive and helpful than the dialogue in the classroom, because the students doing the course on the web have full liberty of choice as to time and place for their studies, they are doing the course at their own pace, they have, if I may put it like that, very flexible working hours, and so they have time to reflect – and reflection paves the way for a fruitful dialogue with the distance course teacher and consequently for the understanding of the language.

I would say, therefore, that those students will benefit the most from the courses on the web who make the most of the dialogue. And I want to conclude by emphasizing once again the three important points: the dialogue, the flexibility and the focus on the syntactical structures, on understanding Greek.