

Recontextualizing the Teaching of Ancient Greek within the New Standards for Classical Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

The New Standards should be an opportunity to make fresh choices about the introductory practices and exercises for beginning and intermediate Greek. These should emphasize the *connections* that exist to other areas of a student's educational experience. Work with transliteration and exercise is one especially good way to make these connections early. Topics and authors beyond the Classical period but with broad recognition (e.g. the Bible, Alexander the Great) and STEM-related readings (Aristotle and Euclid, for example) should become core readings.

KEYWORDS

Greek, classical language pedagogy, Alexander the Great, Aristotle, Euclid, STEM education, Standards

The teaching of ancient (or “pre-Modern”) Greek in 21st century America involves facing challenges and capitalizing on opportunities that are distinct to the language and legacy of Greek. In both the original and the newly revised *Standards for Classical Language Learning*, Greek is necessarily and understandably paired with Latin in articulating the categories and particulars of competence at various levels. Other articles in this collection discuss how the Standards promote integrating the languages into cultural contexts in the form of language-based engagement with Classical cultures via different media and scaled for all levels P-20. The following pages, however, aim to be a contribution toward integrating the unique needs of future instruction in Greek with the architecture of the Standards. The coming years should be a time to capitalize on the updated Standards and to spur a revitalization of the teaching of Ancient Greek, especially at the beginning and intermediate levels. Low enrollments and lack of availability or support for teaching Greek are well known and much lamented. The priorities of the Standards can and should spur a

reorienting of the priorities of Greek language classes in ways that will both correspond to broader interest and result in improved language comprehension.

This goal and the priorities of the Standards at the moment do not mesh easily with the dominant approaches and pedagogical resources for teaching pre-Modern Greek. Indeed, Greek language teaching and pedagogical support materials are woefully out of sync with interest in the language outside the academy. The teaching of Ancient Greek currently is dominated by the curricular demands of the 19th century in seminaries or universities, that is, theology and exegesis for the former and high Classical literature for the latter. There is nothing inherently or fundamentally flawed in the methods embedded in these approaches. This is a point worth emphasizing. The analytical methods, explanations, and exercises that gird the structure underlying nearly all textbooks used in beginning Greek classes today do lead to student success in schools where these methods are a sound fit with the curriculum and methods of other courses that students are taking. The problem is, and the Standards make this abundantly clear, that most students are no longer learning languages in those environments. This mismatch results in lack of student interest and success with Greek. Classicists have all had conversations that wistfully recall, or wish to reinstate, the curricular priorities that made instruction in Latin and Greek central more than a century ago. But the Standards make clear what students' educational environment is and what it will be. Also, lack of student success in Greek language courses too often leads to the conclusion that instruction in Ancient Greek is fundamentally at odds with current education, rather than that the techniques learned and replicated by today's teachers of Greek can be updated.

Accordingly, the major point here is that the goals of the Standards should act as focal points for reorienting not just the strategies, but the topics, of beginning instruction in Ancient Greek. Classicists are really very fortunate in having great opportunities and being well-equipped to make this adjustment. Classicists in their scholarly work have been studying the ancient world in fresh ways that have built up rich and detailed models of the cultural communities in which Ancient Greek flourished. For decades Classicists in their classrooms have been teaching courses in translation about these cultural communities, so teachers of Greek know both how to create and how to teach the vast body of community-based knowledge in which Greek was embedded. But there remains a huge gap between what Classicists know how to do in research and culture courses and what to do in language classes.

The remainder of this discussion addresses ways to close that gap. As far as technique and method, much of what Gruber-Miller says about Latin applies to Greek, so the focus here remains on subject matter or topics that are distinct to Greek.

First, there is a broad interest in and fascination with Greek culture, but the readings offered in beginning and intermediate language courses marginalize most of that interest. Movies, documentaries, and internet websites give a reasonable snapshot of the topics that have broad cultural resonance. Across media, there are some variations but no real surprises. From the perspective of a typical beginning Greek class, the most widespread topics are alarming. Suppose students become intrigued with all the Greeks they hear about in popular cultural discourse. Chances are that intrigue involves mythology, or really, the stories in mythology. Students in Greek language classes can probably get a smattering of that. There is the Bible. They are likely going to be told directly, or indirectly by the segregation in instructional materials, that Biblical Greek is so different from Classical Greek that beginning instruction in Biblical Greek needs to be fundamentally different from that in Greek otherwise. From a language instruction perspective, however, there is no reason for this segregation. The Greek of the New Testament, the Septuagint, and related texts is more similar to the Greek of Classical texts than many Classical authors are to one another. For example, the transition from the Greek of Xenophon to the Greek of Thucydides, Herodotus, or drama is more challenging than the transition from Xenophon to the Greek of Biblical texts.

What about popular Greeks who are also popular in Greek textbooks? For the mechanics of his language and importance in the Classical tradition, Xenophon has rightly been a mainstay of early instruction in Greek. In broader cultural discourse, however, Xenophon has at best “B-list” recognition, despite lurking behind such popular creations as the *Warriors* movie. That does not mean he should be excluded from Greek courses, but he does not have a lot of built-in drawing power to attract students to whom he is not already known. The same is true of many standard authors at the beginning and intermediate levels. Lysias’ account of the murder of Eratosthenes, an understandably popular text in intermediate Greek recently, is a great read for students once they are learning Greek, but it is not an author or story that has recognition enough to lure students to enroll.

So who are the “A-listers”? Plato and Socrates are there. For them, interested students will likely be well-served in beginning and intermediate Greek classes.

Homer is on the A-list. He is somewhat segregated again, but he is in general well-supported by pedagogical materials for early Greek learners. After Plato, Socrates, and Homer, however, A-listers are lucky to receive even a passing mention in Greek pedagogical materials. Let us start with Aristotle. Why? Because students are eager to read the *Metaphysics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*? Yes, those are on PhD reading lists, but the pedagogical dynamite here is not Aristotle the philosopher but Aristotle the biologist. In the context of 21st-century education, consider how many students take biology: basically all of them, which makes biology an excellent arena for productive points of contact with Greek.¹ Page for page, most of Aristotle's writings are devoted to biology and physics, and a lot of this material comes in relatively simple Greek in manageable segments. Here even titles prove unintended hurdles for teachers and students. Aristotle's *History of Animals*, for example, conjures an archaic discussion of the evolution of animal life, where a more accurate title in modern terms is *Animal Research*, in the sense that much of the work is a descriptive catalog of animal biology. In this sense, the work is a goldmine of discreet vignettes of animals and scientific method.² The *Silurus aristotelis*, a catfish named for Aristotle because of his description (9.37.621a20-b2), is a premiere example of an entertaining passage that played out in modern scientific exploration. Analogous opportunities abound. Students dissecting animals in a biology class can read Aristotle's descriptions of parts of animals, along with those on projectile-vomiting bears (*On Marvelous Things Heard*, 845a17-22) and more. The points of contact here are not just superficial. When Aristotle refers to the chest of an animal and a student sees that it is still identified as the *thorax* in their biology class, they make the connection not just as an etymology but as the continuity of the scientific tradition. They can—and teachers can structurally encourage them to with assignments—compare the way Aristotle describes and analyzes an organism with the way modern biologists describe and analyze the same animal. Accounts of animals allow for many Cultural Connections (in the language of the Standards). For example, a biological account of a creature can serve as a gateway to other genres of writing. Frogs, for example, appear as vehicles for cultural meaning in Aesop, Aristophanes, Plutarch and elsewhere.

1 [Georgia Irby's collection](#) of scientific texts in Greek should be a starting point for Greek teachers looking to incorporate this material into their classes at all levels.

2 Since I teach in Louisiana where crawfish boils are an integral and routine part of cultural life, I have beginning Greek students read Aristotle's paragraph on the parts and functions of crawfish (Aristotle *On Youth, Old Age, Life and Death, and Respiration* 477a2-4).

Plutarch! He is not always an A-lister himself, but he is ubiquitous. It is almost impossible to watch a documentary about ancient Greece without Plutarch being quoted somewhere along the way, but he is effectively invisible in Greek language classes. His Greek is formal and is no barrier to young readers when selected as judiciously as is done with any other author. Many iconic distillations of Greco-Roman culture, from the activities at the Delphic oracle to Spartan humor to revealing moments in the biographies of prominent Romans, derive from Plutarch.³ This sort of potential is analogous to that for another perennial A-lister, however, Alexander the Great. Writings of or contemporary with Alexander are mostly beyond our grasp and beyond the reach of novice students of Greek, so readings would derive from post-classical accounts, and as a result the career of the man perhaps most responsible for making Greek of international, transcultural, even global importance is effectively absent for new readers of Greek. Alexander the Great's own legacy plays out in cultural traditions well beyond Greece and Rome, but whether via Plutarch, Arrian or some other Greek source, he would be a welcome addition and attraction.

To return to STEM-disciplines, Hippocrates is another A-lister virtually excluded from Greek language courses. There is now at least the very appealing Hayes-Nimis reader of *Airs, Waters, and Places and the Hippocratic Oath* (ISBN 9780983222859). As with Aristotle, the traditional titles of works are unhelpful but the points of contact are substantive. These are early writings by health care professionals. *Airs, Waters, and Places* is a handbook for travelling doctors to guide them in assessing the environmental factors that characterize diseases in any given region they visit. The Oath of course is a statement of professional ethics. Characterized as such, both documents seem like very modern documents, differing in the particulars but not fundamentally alien in their purposes. Again, students can see how ordinary Greek words become the technical medical vocabulary of later periods, including today. They can also see first-hand the development of professional techniques, such as the way a visiting doctor assesses the environmental factors that contribute to disease. The Hippocratics' focus on nutrition is of much contemporary interest and it is not hard to spur discussion when reading Hippocrates' account of the historical development of medicine or his analogy with the methods used by trainers of

³ For example, at my school there is a graduate student doing research on Spartacus, so I had him work up vocabulary and notes on Plutarch's account of Spartacus from the *Life of Crassus*. This selection is only a few pages, and this student found the reading and assignment relatively easy, something you rarely hear about assignments in Greek classes. Once I finish correcting and editing his work, I will have a brief Spartacus reader that I can post online and make available.

athletes (*Ancient Medicine* 1-5, 20). This is not to mention that B-lister Galen, who operated on gladiators, performed surgery on eyes and brains, and tortured animals as public entertainment, or his employer, Marcus Aurelius, whose writings in Greek offer insight into the inner life of one of the most influential of Roman Emperors and whose dying scenes in the movies *Gladiator* and *Fall of the Roman Empire* grant him some name recognition.

So back to A-listers and STEM disciplines to an author whom virtually every student from high school onward has read in translation. I refer of course to Euclid. Any student who has taken a beginning geometry class has effectively read a chunk of Euclid in translation.⁴

At this point I want to spotlight some examples and scenarios, in keeping with the structure and goals of the new Standards, for how Greek language instruction can and should be linked to other crucial areas in the educational curriculum. The interaction between Greek and math, primarily geometry, is scalable. By this I mean that the more Greek and more geometry a student learns the more the two courses can reinforce each other. For example, math is where students are most likely to meet letters of the Greek alphabet. Beginning Greek instruction almost never makes anything of this connection, but it means that from the moment students begin learning the alphabet in Greek language classes, they can begin making connections to other classes, especially math classes. Euclid and Greek mathematicians label their segments as alpha, beta, gamma, and so on just as these segments are still labeled A, B, C and so on, and really this is nothing more than an act of translation between alphabets. Transliteration is an underappreciated skill in beginning Greek but one which here can be of simple but profound importance and application (see the Appendix).

As students learn words and vocabulary, even without syntax, the points of contact increase. The names of geometrical shapes are themselves lessons and reinforcement in numbers and other vocabulary. As in biology and medicine, much ordinary vocabulary in Greek becomes technical vocabulary in modern times. At this point, simple transliteration is a sufficient skill for students to begin seeing Greek words all around them. At the level of syntax, Euclid's constructions are repetitive and formulaic yet progressive. The biggest challenge is that some core constructions in Euclid and mathematics, such as the third person imperative ἔστω (from εἶμι), are not so common in other texts and in beginning Greek generally. As students

⁴ Survey [this helpful site](#) for passages and support for reading Euclid at a beginning level.

progress, opportunities for more sophisticated correspondences become available. Students can read in Greek the same problems and proofs that they read and study in geometry. The most famous example is the Pythagorean theorem, but such correspondences abound the more students advance in both classes. Pythagoras is another A-lister, by the way, but more importantly these types of readings also expand and enhance what we can do with comprehension. Students could draw and animate on a computer screen, for example, what Euclid writes about in Greek. I do not give this example as a playful educational distraction from normal work in the language classroom. Such an exercise both truly measures comprehension in the language and develops a very real and lucrative skill. Students who can read a complex and foreign text and convert it to computer animation have a skill that is desirable for many jobs by many employers.

It is in these types of points of contact where I wish to assert today that we have the greatest opportunities to simultaneously pursue the goals of the New Standards and make Greek language instruction newly meaningful in a 21st-century educational curriculum. I have touched upon points of contact with biology classes, medicine and especially mathematics. I call these points of contact, but in the terminology of the Standards, they are Connections (Goal 3). They invite another C of the Standards, Comparisons (Goal 4), between the ancient Greek antecedents and modern practice. They develop the language of professional Communities (Goal 5), whether of scientists, doctors, mathematicians, philosophers, artists, engineers, authors, and others, communities whose global Communication is forged in shared understanding and techniques, modes forged by ancient Greeks in their language. Even beyond and throughout these Connections comes a more thoroughly, meaningfully integrated educational experience. In the Humanities too often dialogue forms in opposition to or envy of educators in STEM disciplines. In fact, educators in the Humanities and STEM struggle with mostly the same issues, primarily retention and student success. A conversation with almost any teacher of math below the level of Calculus prompts the same frustrations as surface in beginning Latin and Greek. Greek can help both causes, however, because it can serve as a bridge between these courses. Instruction in Greek can and should support students in biology, math, and so on, not just in English, even though it does that too. Greek is, I submit, unique in this potential. No other language has an intrinsic connection to biology, medicine, math, art, literature, and more that Greek has. Far too often, almost always, foreign language and math or biology or English are separate courses where students

struggle. Lack of success in one demands more time and takes energy away from others, or some class becomes the one that falls away. Greek seems like an unconscionable burden to a student in such a situation. If we reorient Greek so that it supports and enhances these other challenging and necessary courses, however, then it is not a dichotomy to add Greek. Imagine a student saying, “Those words in biology confused me today, but they will make sense when I get to Greek class,” or “I am glad we worked that math problem in Greek today, so I will already know it when I get to math class.” Imagine telling parents, “If you want your child to succeed in math, have them take Greek at the same time. It will help them.”

I will wager that most of us in Classics readily believe that the critical analytical skills we build in learning Latin and Greek foster success in other classes and are true life skills, but we have to deliver on that faith and that promise early, not just decades down the road. That means we have to make those connections in our language instruction. The Standards point the way.

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APPENDIX

Below is an excerpt from one of the learning scenarios for Greek in the New Standards. It encapsulates a number of the ideas promoted in this article and ties them more explicitly to the Five C's of the Standards. [Here is a link to the full slide show.](#)

Instructional Setting:

Students should have had practice with the Greek alphabet, the sounds of each of the letters, and how they are transliterated into English. This will be their first or an early activity with learning words in the Greek alphabet.

Learn-Practice-Assess

A teacher is going to work with a class both to practice recognizing words written in Greek but also to introduce tools for recognizing Greek words in a variety of contexts, along with concepts for understanding why ancient Greek appears in so many environments today.

The teacher starts with Ζεύς, which looks very similar to the English version, Zeus. Students usually can recognize the name and know something of who Zeus is and students might talk about why they know this figure from antiquity. There is an important principle here, though: just knowing the Greek writing system can connect them immediately to a familiar word. This is a chance to ask about Cultures, i.e., what cultural practices do we learn about from the stories of Zeus.

The next word is Ὀδυσσεύς, another name. Students might know Odysseus from mythology and the *Odyssey* but they also know the word “odyssey” that is inspired by his stories. They might also encounter him with the name Ulysses, his Latin name, a chance to point out that many Greek words reach English through the Romans (sometimes in Latinized form, sometimes in Greek, sometimes both). This exercise can be repeated or substituted with Ἡρακλῆς/Herakles/Hercules. This is a chance to make Comparisons, how a name, story or word develops, remains similar or changes through time in different communities.

The next word is θώραξ. This word is harder to see as the English word “thorax” but saying it out loud reveals that it sounds almost the same. It also has the same meaning, but it is a less common word than “chest” in English. Greek doctors used ordinary Greek words in their work, and doctors ever since have been using many of the same Greek words but now they are scientific and associated

with educated professionals. This raises the issue of Communities, because many Greek words today are used by a specific specialized community, even though those communities do not use Greek as their primary language.

The next word is ὀκτάγωνον. For this word the teacher can ask students to draw what the word means before transliterating it as “octagon.” This is a straightforward way to link a strange-looking Greek word directly to its meaning. A teacher can use this as a basis for Greek numbers using shapes (pentagon, hexagon, and so on). Why do we use Greek here? Students in geometry are familiar with the Greek letter π in a mathematical context. Ancient Greek mathematicians were geometers so later mathematicians incorporated Greek into their work. This is another example of an international community whose language incorporated Greek. Here is a chance for Connections, because students can see that it is not accidental when they encounter Greek words or letters in many areas. They can start pursuing why Greek appears where it does.

With these models, the teacher can prompt students to explore what other classes or areas of their life (e.g., biology, names of animals especially dinosaurs, disciplines like psychology, philosophy, everyday words like telephone and technology—all of which highlight the tendency of Greek to form compound words). Students should develop the habit of recognizing Greek words and letters in other classes or outside school and using their class in Greek to understand why.

Adaptation to other ages/grades:

This lesson can be scaled to other grades and also across multiple classes. The particular words chosen can be selected to suit the school’s learning environment and the immediate connections to those words can vary in sophistication. In all cases, the students should practice with words that tie in to their other classes and to their experiences outside of school.

Reflection

Greek suffuses the 21st-century world in a fundamentally unique way. While it is common to assert the foundational and pervasive role of Greek in the Western world, this lesson aims to convert these broad principles into practical student habits. Moreover, the exotic associations of the Greek alphabet can make students nervous and reinforce a distance between Greek and the rest of their education and life. This exercise and the principles it instills set Greek learners on a path to integrate what they learn about Greek into their lives and education continually.