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A HELLENIC REVIEW

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CAMUS IN ATHENS

I have to declare that I am not a standard Classics teacher. I teach part-time in a state comprehensive academy and I am also the subject leader for teacher training in Classics (the PGCE) at the University of Cambridge. This situation allows me, perhaps, multiple perspectives on the teaching of Ancient Greek in schools today.

I am fortunate in that, in addition to Latin, I teach Ancient Greek in my school. Not to very many students, it has to be said: I have three dedicated 12-year-old

Greeklings, who turn up dutifully at 12.40pm every Tuesday lunchtime for 35 minutes. I would love to give them longer, or more lessons,

but I have to teach several other classes at lunchtimes as well, and there simply aren't enough days in the week when I make up the whole teaching staff of the Classics department. We sit round the table, sandwiches in one hand, Wilding's *Greek for Beginners* and a notebook in the other, and off we go into the world of Ancient Greece.

Of course, Wilding's book, first published in 1957, is antiquated, but it has a certain charm. It was the book I learnt Greek from, I am completely familiar with the way it introduces material, and one of the things I need to be able to do when there is little time to teach and even less to prepare is to feel I can rely on the book I use. It is reassuringly old-fashioned and while this was initially a little off-putting to the students who had been learning Latin through the more obviously attractive Cambridge Latin Course, they have come round to see that it is what it is: a crash-course in Ancient Greek language with few frills except those which we can

have a good laugh at together, creating our own fantasy world in which Muses, stewards and Persians endlessly drive horses to the sea or teach pupils about wisdom. Why do they do this? Well, one student already has her eye upon a place to read languages at Cambridge, another is her best friend and hates to hang around the playground at lunchtime – especially when it is wet – and the third (a boy) just 'loves codes'.

I suspect that the number of students taking Ancient Greek in my school will remain small. The

an indication from the numbers of those taking Ancient Greek

'We create our own fantasy world in which Muses, stewards and Persians endlessly drive horses to sea or teach pupils about wisdom'

at GCSE: perhaps around 1200 nationally each year.

Of course, this is not entirely satisfactory. I and many other

teachers like me would love to offer more Ancient Greek; universities would love to have more students experiencing the language prior to taking

up places; even the government has been offering encouragement by including Ancient Greek in the list of possible languages which must be studied in primary schools (although there is very little evidence that this is happening so far) and in the EBacc qualification measure in secondary schools.

So why are numbers so low and, in the view of this educator, likely to become lower? What is making it difficult to get students to be able to do Ancient Greek? The usual culprits are, of course, time and resources. But there are others too: Ancient Greek is likely to be (another) casualty of the bigger educational changes which are happening all around us: tougher GCSEs put an already challenging subject out of reach of all but the most able students; the impact of school accountability measures such as Progress 8 means that schools look long and hard at which subjects are likely to 'increase value' in student achievement; the curriculum is already crowded with subjects which are all but compulsory.

BACK TO SCHOOL

Steven Hunt on the the battle to get Ancient Greek lessons into UK comprehensives



Red-figure fragment, Akestorides Painter, c.450 BC

circumstances in which I teach it are not unlike those in many state schools, where the subject is still offered. The situation in the independent sector is not much better, although numbers are higher. Although we are not able to tell how many students start Ancient Greek, we do get



A baffled schoolboy. Artist unknown. 1840-50.

Meanwhile, the move towards linear examinations, the removal of the short course GCSE, the restrictions on students using AS examinations as a step-up towards A Level – all of these are disincentives for students to make a start by means of different routes which suit the circumstances in which Ancient Greek is often offered: off-timetable and in a teacher's spare time. Finally, there continues to be a shortage of trained teachers for all sectors: government rules on recruitment and bursaries change annually and inconsistently make it difficult to plan ahead and meet the demand.

Shortly before summer there were several newspaper reports suggesting that the study of Ancient Greek at A level was in serious trouble in state schools. A Guardian editorial (The Guardian, 2015) declared the news that

Camden Girls' School was not going to offer A Level Ancient Greek a 'symbolic moment' for state education; Edith Hall worried that there was a real danger that learning Ancient Greek was in danger of providing little more than a privileged form of access for students from independent schools to Oxbridge – a view with which I disagree.

But one of Hall's answers is worth following up: the study of Ancient Greece through such courses as Classical Civilisation is already in place and can be further extended to more students. All students in primary schools study the Ancient Greeks in the History Curriculum; many more study them through Classical Civilisation at GCSE and A Level than any of the linguistic classics courses. But such an obvious answer is ignored. This subject is

marginalized by the government: it is not part of the EBacc and efforts to persuade ministers to make it so have fallen on deaf ears. Instead they favour the traditional-looking linguistic qualifications which are

'Ancient Greek is likely to be (another) casualty of the bigger educational changes which are happening all around us'

attractive to only a few. Perhaps a more mixed qualification combining elements of language and civilisation and literature in translation might be more appealing and valued by students and teachers: in the end, a school needs to have a group which is big enough to justify spending their scarce resources on.

So this teacher is not too hopeful about the future of Ancient Greek in the medium term. But he, like scores of other teachers across the UK, will continue to do their best and offer it to their tiny, dedicated groups. Educational reforms come and go, and it is likely that in the long term the present reforms will be changed either for practical reasons (there aren't enough teachers to teach the Ebacc subjects, for example, as it is) or ideological ones. New resources are being created for Ancient Greek – a primary and a secondary course are mooted, for example – and academics like Edith Hall are convening meetings to discuss the future of the subject area. When the changes occur, we'll still be there, ready, and, with luck, with something better.

Hall, E. (2015, June 20). Classics for the people – why we should all learn from the Ancient Greeks. The Guardian.

The Guardian. (2015, March 13). The Guardian view on Greek A-level: it's part of our democratic inheritance. The Guardian.