

# A Communicative Approach to Ancient Greek

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THIS ESSAY IS a case study on communicative methods in the first-year university Greek class for beginners in Greek. In my classes, students both speak and write Greek to improve their facility with the language. The main goal of the first-year class is reading, not speaking, but I have found that active language use engages students, it helps them learn and remember vocabulary and grammar, and it provides variety. I avoid translation, because in my experience students who do a great deal of translating often get the idea that Greek does not make sense on its own: meaning only comes from English. Since I know my students will have translation-heavy courses in their second and subsequent years in Greek (and often in Latin as well), I work on giving them direct access to Greek, expecting them to understand Greek texts without recourse to English. Students in this class are true beginners, with no prior knowledge of Greek, though they have all studied at least one foreign language, Latin or a modern language.

In this article, I will describe the activities, assignments, and assessments I use. The class meets three days a week for fifty minutes, with forty meetings each semester including a final exam. Thus much of the work of learning the language has to take place outside the classroom. Typical class size is about ten students, almost all undergraduates, about half in their first year of university.

Starting in 2009-2010, my textbook is my own *First Greek Course*, adapted and modernised from W. H. D. Rouse's textbook. This is a grammar-heavy book, but with some 55 pages of readings, about three times as much connected text as in the book I used previously.

Each chapter also has conversation scripts or patterns, based on the readings and the vocabulary. I also use Rouse's *Greek Boy At Home*, the reader Rouse wrote to accompany the text.

A typical class meeting begins with greetings in Greek. I then give the assignment for the next class, collect the day's assignment, and give back the previous one. Next I introduce the new grammar, starting with example sentences. I explain the grammar in English but then give the class a chance to work with it in Greek. For example, I might write a sentence on the board and ask the class simple questions in Greek: who? what? when? I might ask them to change the subject to a different person or number, or to introduce a different verb. I might ask 'what if this happened yesterday?' to elicit past-tense forms. This sort of exercise takes place partly in Greek and partly in English. Students produce isolated forms or short variations on the given sentence in Greek. They may ask questions in English to clarify how the new forms or syntax work. The questions and manipulations are very simple, especially at first, and there's no penalty for making a mistake. Because the questions are simple, they go quickly, so we repeat and practise the new construction or the new vocabulary many times. Often the sentences are whimsical, featuring animals who read, write, or teach: although there are few cats, mice, or elephants in classical Greek literature, there's no harm in introducing them as characters in the classroom if it makes for more lively exercises.

The question words and various other useful idioms (such as yes, no, what does X mean?) are displayed on a poster that always hangs

at the front of the room, even during quizzes. At first, whenever I ask a question, I point to the question word as I speak. Once the words become familiar I can stop doing this, but if students don't answer a question right away, I step back to the poster and repeat the question while pointing. Because the class is small, I don't insist on formal raised hands but just let students call out their answers or follow-up questions. Most of the students are eager to participate; they enjoy playing with the language, and they know the practice is useful. If one or two students are quiet on a given day, I may go round the room asking everyone a question in turn, just to make sure everyone gets actively involved.

At least once a week, and more often as the year goes on, we spend time talking about a reading the class has prepared. First I read the passage aloud, or ask a student to do so. Then I lead them through the passage asking questions about it in Greek, starting with straightforward questions about the facts of the story and moving to interpretation. Students are encouraged to answer in Greek, but English is not forbidden. Students who don't speak in Greek themselves are still hearing Greek, both from me and from their braver classmates, and by the end of the year everyone does manage to speak at least a little. The passages may come from the textbook, from the *Greek Boy*, or elsewhere; the conversation scripts in the textbook are a good starting point for this kind of discussion.

I insist that students never write out a translation of a reading passage (and tell them to follow the same rule even in translation-based classes), and I insist that they make notes on a separate sheet of paper, not on the text itself. When we discuss the passage, they may refer to those notes alongside the Greek text. To help train them to take good notes, I occasionally ask students to write down and hand in 'the first three notes you made on reading 6 of chapter 12' or 'the first thing you wrote down for this passage that was *not* a vocabulary word' or the like.

Occasionally, I give out a passage to be read at sight, and walk the class through it as I do with the passages they have read beforehand. In this case, I may need to explain new vocabulary, in Greek; this goes much better when I take the time to work out a definition before class. The glossary in the *Greek Boy*, almost all in Greek, is an invaluable resource here.

The last activity in a class hour is often a quiz. I give roughly ten unannounced quizzes during a semester, each ten minutes long. Each quiz is a passage of prose that they have never seen before. I tell the class explicitly that because the goal of the class is to teach them to read Greek, it is *that* skill they will be tested on. Passages may be stories from myth or literature. Early in the year they are my own tellings, but as the year goes on I use more or less adapted passages from ancient authors (such as Aesop, Xenophon, Lysias, Plato, Palaephatus). With each passage, there are three words underlined to be parsed in context (form and syntax), and students choose two of these. There are five comprehension questions, written in Greek, and

students answer three of them, either in Greek or in English. If students answer more than the minimum number of questions, I mark all the answers and let the best ones count. Average scores are usually about 15 out of 20 points, and it's rare that a student scores below 10. The more ambitious students answer at least some of the comprehension questions in Greek; on the other hand, weaker students don't always understand the questions and sometimes just copy out words from the text that seem to match some of the words in the question. Note that the students are *not* asked to translate the passage, but to read and understand it.

I have given this sort of reading quiz for many years. At first, I wrote the comprehension questions in English, but as I started using more oral questions and answers during class, I realized that students could understand questions in Greek. Indeed, I've found no difference in scores between a passage with the questions in English and the same passage with the same questions in Greek. Writing the questions in Greek gives students a bit more text to read (thus, even more practice), encourages them to answer in Greek, and subtly emphasizes that Greek must be understood on its own, not through English.

Homework assignments include readings to prepare, drill exercises, and composition. In the drill exercises, students might change the main verb of a sentence between singular and plural, past tense and present, active and passive. They might replace nouns by pronouns, combine sentences using various subordinate constructions, or re-write a sentence using a different construction (for example, turning a Genitive Absolute into a subordinate clause). Ideally, students think in Greek as they do these exercises, rather than trying to work them out in English and back-translate.

The most important written exercises, though, are the composition exercises, which are the most overtly communicative part of my class. I might ask students to make up their own questions and answers, just as on a quiz, for a reading passage. Students might summarize the reading, or re-write it from the point of view of a different character, or re-write verse as prose. A more creative exercise asks students to take five sentences from the drill exercises and weave them together into a coherent story. Early in the year, I tidy up the resulting stories and give them out to the class; later on, as students get better at writing and more confident at reading, I ask the students to distribute their stories at the same time as they hand them in to me. I usually give a follow-up assignment in which students comment on each other's stories. Finally, I assign occasional free compositions on a given theme.

Because the students are all at roughly the same level in the language, they can all read each other's stories with little difficulty; thus, they give each other a limitless supply of straightforward reading material. The better students pay some attention to style, both in their own writing and in their comments on classmates' work; the weaker students may use English word order or make grammatical errors, but they get better with practice. The opportunity to create something in Greek, and to communicate with classmates (or even to show off for classmates) is appealing, and because they can do it in writing at home, with as much time as they like to look up vocabulary or forms, there is little pressure.

I have moved toward more communicative teaching over the past few years. Because I have used some of the same quiz passages from one year to the next, I have a rough standard of comparison. As students have done more listening, speaking, and writing, quiz scores have been stable or even a bit higher. I have had to gloss fewer vocabulary words on quizzes, because students are exposed to more words and remember more of the words they've seen and heard. Six of my students took the College Greek Exam in spring 2010; five scored above the national average, one receiving a medal.

Students are enthusiastic about the class. Comments on evaluations say things like 'being able to speak Greek is exciting'; 'the dialogue in Greek was intimidating at first but it became less so as the semester went on'; 'the course teaches you to look at a Greek book

'The visitor to the oral method class is impressed by the interest and participation of the pupils.'

— Sidney Morris in  
*Viae Novae: New Techniques  
in Latin Teaching*

as it is (without translating) and approach it like reading English (even if that's hard).' Although students invariably say this course is more work than most classes in our university, they also say they are learning more than in most classes. Students complained that exercises in the previous textbook seemed like 'busywork'; they do not say this about the communicative composition exercises.

Thus my students are learning at least as much Greek as ever and

are excited by the class. Of course no one comes out of one year of college Greek fluent in the language. On the other hand, I hope to have given them the tools they'll need to get there — basic grammar and vocabulary as a foundation, but also, and more important, the experience of hearing or reading a text that they can understand right away, directly in its own language.

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