

Teaching the Greek Language in an American Charter School

Charalampos Ntalakas

(Primary School of Eleousa, Ioannina, Greece)

Abstract: Our present paper refers to the teaching of Greek as a foreign language at the American public charter school Plato Academy in the Pinellas County district of the state of Florida. Our goal was to explore the context in which the Greek language is taught as a foreign language on a daily mandatory basis to students of Plato Academy Seminole. The teaching of the Greek language in this form is quite common practice in the USA. The research was realized with the participation of a group of students who gave us the opportunity to explore and identify their strengths and their weaknesses concerning their linguistic performance in Greek. Students consider that Greek is a particularly difficult language and assume that they will not continue learning it after high school as they will not need it.

Key words: charter school, Greek language, Pinellas County

1. Introduction

The last years, the Greek language has been implemented as a foreign language in the educational system of many countries (i.e., U.S.A, Canada) in the primary, secondary and higher education. The church and the local Greek communities' population play a very important role in the organization and function of the Greek courses. The teaching of the Greek language is not carried out based on a single curriculum but it varies according to the region and the objectives of each school. There are no supervisory actors and guidance services that coordinate teachers' actions and align them with the aims and objectives of the state in the field of Greek-language education. Defining the framework and the various forms of teaching Greek is challenging and triggers a fruitful discussion that could be beneficial for the improvement of educational practices. In our case, we initially attempt to clarify the concepts of "mother tongue", "second" and "foreign language" and we briefly describe the organization of the Greek-language education, the methods and the strategies followed the contributions of the teachers who teach Modern Greek and, next, we analyze the objectives of our research. Additionally, we examine the teaching of Greek at the charter school Plato Academy in Florida and we present the views of American teachers and foreign-language students over some key aspects of learning Greek. Finally, we draw significant conclusions from the results of our research and we make some general proposals concerning the improvement of Greek-language education.

2. Teaching Greek Abroad

Charalampos Ntalakas, Med, Ph.D., Teacher in the Primary School of Eleousa; research areas: educational management, sociology, psychology. E-mail: xdalakas@gmail.com.

2.1 Mother Tongue

“Mother tongue or first language” (L1) is defined as “the language that a person learns from his mother, the first language he learns in general or the language that is the most dominant at a given time” (Kiziridou D., 2019). It is closely linked to national identity, socialization, cognitive development, communication, exchange of information and knowledge, feelings and thoughts.

2.2 Second-Foreign Language

The term “second language” (L2) often refers to any language other than the first. The L2 can be learned in natural environment conditions within a school environment or language courses as it is necessary for daily communication due to personal, social and professional reasons (Mitsis N. & Mitsi A., 2007). According to Skourtou (1998), a “foreign language” is considered to be a language whose learning takes place in a classroom and it cannot be used for communication purposes in everyday life. Learning a “foreign language” without a natural language environment can be quite difficult.

2.3 Greek in the USA

In the U.S.A., one cannot find Greek schools. There are American bilingual schools, whose students’ population is ethnically heterogeneous, offering the Greek Language as a “second” or “foreign language”, in other words as a part of their curriculum. There are also afternoon courses of learning Greek during the weekends, for students who were born in the USA, yet, their parents are Greek, which either operate under the responsibility of a community organization or sometimes under the Church; either way separately from the American educational system. Hence, Greek-language education in the United States is offered to learners of Greek origin who speak Greek, to learners of Greek origin who cannot speak Greek and to foreigners. Although the latter group is less crowded, it does exist, as there are students of non-Greek origin who learn Greek either by choice or because Greek is offered as a course by their school or by the educational district. The public schools which offer Greek as a “second” or “foreign” language are called charter schools K8 (kindergarten, elementary and high school), such as Plato Academy and the Athenian Academy in Florida. There are also schools that offer Greek language courses at a high school level such as Odyssey in Delaware and Archimedean in Miami. It should be noted here that in the last two schools, students can attend Mathematics in Greek, during the first grades of primary school.

2.4 Basic Views for Teaching Greek as a “Foreign” Language

Within the framework of second language acquisition, various views have been stated; two main ones will be briefly presented. The first is based on the assumption that during the course of learning a “second language” at school, the child should not use his or her mother language. An important representative of this view is Tara Williams Fortune¹ who is experienced in “second language” immersion programs in the United States and Canada. More specifically, she claims: “One teacher, one language. Sustain in Greek. Non negotiable” (Williams Fortune T., 2012) This statement shows the importance of maintaining the use of language inside and outside the classroom and of exposing pupils to it extensively. She also considers that Greek teachers among other foreign language teachers can offer their students this “potential”. Hence, teachers are expected to use L1 during the first three months of teaching and then employ L2, as well. Her method is implemented at Archimedes in Miami, Florida with very good results.

¹ Tara Williams Fortune is the Director of the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition at the University of Minnesota.

The other view supports that the L1 is the basis for the child to learn L2. In other words, the mother language that a person acquires from the surrounding environment affects the level of L2 knowledge. According to Georgoyiannis (Tsarkovista Ch., 2018) “a good L1 language level guarantees an easier and more successful bilingualism”.

2.5 Teachers of Greek- Greek Language Teaching

The teachers of the Greek language are divided into two categories:

a) Greek Diaspora teachers who live permanently abroad and work in some form of Greek-language center in the USA and have studied either at a Greek University or at a university in the new country of residence or, there is also the case that they are not professional teachers and, yet, they teach Greek.

b) Certified teachers of Greek. They work in primary education in Greek schools and they are able to teach in the United States after their request and the relevant invitation of the Greek Ministry of Education concerning the teaching of the Greek language abroad. The Greek Ministry of Education offers a specific number of posts for teachers of Greek in the USA giving them a monthly amount of money for their living. However, the ministerial decision to appoint them there, means that the teacher will not work at a USA school. The teachers are placed by the New York Education Coordinator and they must contact the school board and the ITES (International Exchange Services) to join the International Exchange Teachers category in order to issue the J1 visa from the US Embassy in Greece. It is a time-consuming and difficult process.

3. The American Charter school Plato Academy in Florida

The charter school Plato Academy, is located in the Tampa area of Florida and includes ten campuses: Clearwater, New Port Richie, Tampa, Palm Harbor, Saint Petersburg, Largo, Seminole, Pinellas Park, Tarpon Springs. It is a K8 school, with five elementary grades and three high school ones, kindergarten and pre-school. In all of these campuses there are about 27 teachers who teach the Greek language. Eleven of them are teachers from Greece. The percentage of students of Greek origin is about 1% and almost everyone attends the school of Tarpon Springs, which is a Greek community. This school is funded by the state of Florida, which provides students with a sum of money, therefore, parents do not pay tuition. It is managed by a Board of Greek-Americans. They had initially entrusted its management to the Greek-American businessman and CEO of a company called Steve Christopoulos.

Mr Christopoulos envisioned the development of the school and the creation of many campuses starting from a school in Clearwater. He managed to cultivate diversity and attract students by offering the teaching of the Greek language on a mandatory, daily basis. He cooperated with the Greek government and succeeded to have several seconded Greek teachers. After his death², the 2019-2020 school year was a new starting point for the members of the Board. They distributed roles and tasks to the school principals and took over administrative responsibilities

3.1 The Teaching of the Greek Language in Plato Academy

The teaching of Greek at Plato Academy is mostly oriented to the creation of a favorable perspective towards Greece than to the proper learning of the Greek language following the methods associated with the learning of foreign languages. The policy assigned by the administration was, from the beginning, that Greek is for fun,

² In the summer of 2018, he died from drowning t the coast of Costa Rica.

therefore, students and parents do not treat the course with the appropriate severity (Charalambidou M., 2019). This is reinforced by the absence of a curriculum related to the teaching of the Greek language. The teaching of Greek depends on the interests of the teacher, but also on his skills and knowledge of the Greek language and culture, his scientific and pedagogical training, teaching skills and classroom management. The Greek teacher is called to gain the respect and capture the attention of the students, to improve himself, to follow the way in which teachers of Diaspora teach, to change practices, to adapt to a routine where the primary concern is to update the school's online platforms and to avoid problems of indiscipline in the classroom.

3.2 Goals of the Research

The main objective of our research was to explore the framework for teaching Greek as a “foreign” language at Plato Academy Seminole, Florida. Other objectives concern issues such as the development, the reform and the evaluation of the curriculum, the levels of language learning, the educational competence and guidance of teachers, the popularity of the course from the part of both pupils and teachers, areas of interest and difficulties, teaching methods, the organization of cultural actions and the introduction of innovations, the support of the curriculum by principals and teachers, supervision by the responsible experienced tutors, the basic education, the training and the professional development of teachers.

4. The Research

4.1 Methodology of Research

For the purposes of our research, we used J. McNiff's (1995) model which presents a productive type of empirical research, which enables the researcher to deal simultaneously with more than one issue. There is a central figure, which concerns the main issue being investigated and a number of peripheral circles concerning secondary issues, which either make up the central issue or elaborate on it. Thus, the researcher deals with several problems without losing the focus on the central one. In this way, he controls all the conditions that affect it.

4.2 The Sample

In the survey, a number of 124 students in the 2nd, 5th and 7th grade participated along with 16 teachers, 3 men and 13 women. Only a few of these had Greek origin on the part of the father or mother. The students of the 2nd grade, after two full school years of learning the basic elements of Greek, they had acquired some kind of reading and speaking ability. The students of the 5th grade, the last grade of primary school, had completed the most basic level of learning and they were ready to continue in high school, at a more demanding level. The students of the 7th grade followed a specific program, for the first time, linked to the acquisition of High School credit while they had already passed the Mid Term exams and the Final test.

4.3 Time of Conduct -Data Collection Tools-Evaluation of the Data

The survey was conducted in December 2019, January, February and March 2020 at the Seminole school with the participation of students and teachers. The research involved four phases: planning (December 2019), data collection (January and February 2020), observation and reflection (March 2020). In order to collect the data, questionnaires with closed questions, observation and a structured interview were used. For our survey we used both open and free techniques -interview, observation, questionnaire with closed questions and open questions- and more rigorous and quantitative -structured interview, questionnaire, student calendar. The validity of the data has been ensured by the “triangulation” method (McNiff J., 1995). This is a triple cross-checking of data using

three different methods of data collection: observation, interview and questionnaire. This ensured an inter-objective control of the findings. In this way, we are able to analyze the social conditions that shape any practices used in the classroom with the ultimate aim to reform the social and professional context in which the teacher acts.

4.4 The Results of the Research

Table 1 represents the students' views on the Greek language program in which they participate. The 2nd grade students at a percentage of 92% are happy to learn the Greek language. It appears that younger students are glad to learn a foreign language and, likewise, their parents are excited about this possibility. The attitude of their parents towards the Greek curriculum is positive and this is confirmed by their participation in all the activities and events of the students (celebrations, festivals, concerts, etc.). The teaching goals such as learning the alphabet and reading small words, learning the colors, the days of the week, the months, the numbers, basic expressions of communication in combination with learning the Greek mythology, the gods of Olympus, the myths of Aesop, etc. through project work create an attractive environment for them. The short duration of each lesson (30 minutes) plays an important role in the concentration of the students as opposed to the duration of the teaching hour in Secondary school (50 minutes).

Many 5th grade students have lost interest in Greek as they have not yet learned to read and have not taken the time to learn basic expressions and vocabulary. Therefore, it is particularly difficult to follow up with the program especially when many elements of grammar are introduced. Only a percentage of 63% of 5th grade students feel happy to learn Greek. The things are getting worse for 7th grade students as only 48% of them are satisfied with learning Greek. An important explanation for this attitude is the fact that they have already chosen the High School they are going to attend and the curriculum there includes foreign languages other than Greek. Moreover, they have not been informed by the program managers about the possibility of obtaining the State Language Certification and the possibility of enrolling to Greek programs from various Universities — Modern Greek and Classic Greek. Lastly, they pay particular attention to the courses that are evaluated in the examinations of the State³ and incorporated into their student profile.

Table 1 Plato Academy Seminole's Students' Views for the Greek Language

	2nd		5th	7th
Are you happy to learn Greek?	YES	92%	63%	48%
Would you like to have a second choice of another foreign language?	YES	68%	74%	89%
Do you think that the Greek language is difficult for you?	YES	57%	80%	83%
Do you intent to continue learning Greek after Middle School?	YES	64%	44%	8%
Do you think that the Greek language is useful for you?	YES	76%	38%	5%
Do you plan to visit Greece in the future?	YES	90%	76%	73%
Do you like the way that teachers teach the Greek language?	YES	97%	84%	78%

Students of the 2nd grade want to have the choice of another foreign language at 68%, the 5th grade at 74%, and the 7th grade at 89%. In our opinion, the fact that the Spanish language dominates the greater Florida region plays a role to their views, as there are many regions that were the first colonies of Spanish and Portuguese. In addition, many residents come from countries such as Mexico, Cuba and other Latin American countries where

³ FSA (Florida State Assessments).

people speak Spanish-like language. Let us not forget that the second official foreign language of the US is Spanish. Spanish is spoken quite often in the students' family environment. Hence, it seems particularly difficult to deal with another language, such as Greek, unless they are convinced that it can be useful for their future plans.

The 83% of 7th grade students believe that the Greek language is very difficult. The same opinion is shared by the 5th grade students reaching a percentage of 80% and the 2nd grade students, a percentage of 57%. The most important burden is the fact that the Greek language is completely unknown to students; the latter cannot find any connection with English. They find it difficult to understand the Greek alphabet and the letters, to understand the meaning of simple words, basic elements of grammar such as gender, cases, verbs, numbers, time, etc. They learn expressions mechanically and do not use any kind of dictionary in order to develop their knowledge. They are also disappointed by the fact that there are no books and workbooks to organize previous knowledge and use them as a basis. Photocopies, educational games and projects do not guarantee a planned path towards learning the Greek language, since the knowledge built at school is temporary with a lot of revisions.

Only the 8% of the 7th grade students say that they intend to continue studying the Greek language after high school. This, unfortunately, is the most important point that the official people for the Greek program should focus on. They must connect this knowledge with the future study of it, or even, its use. Moreover, only 5% of the students in the 7th grade have the impression that the Greek language will be necessary in the future. Therefore, they have not understood the importance of knowing Greek and its usefulness. It is particularly disappointing when these views come from students who have been taught Greek on a daily basis for eight years! The majority of students of all classes state that they would like to visit Greece in the future. Very important for this attitude is the fact that the Greek curriculum particularly highlights the Greek mythology, the Greek history, ancient Greece and its great figures (philosophers, scientists, and writers), the Greek islands, the climate, the entertainment, etc. through videos and project tasks. One of the first things that come to mind when they hear the word Greece are the national anthem, the Parthenon and the Acropolis, Alexander the Great and Greek food. Finally, most students are happy and satisfied with the way the Greek language is taught and have confidence in the Greek teachers, which is very often the case when it comes to teachers whose mother tongue is Greek.

On the other hand, teachers at school⁴ have the opinion that many pupils and parents do not encourage their children to learn a foreign language if they feel that it will not be useful in the future. Many students have difficulty to learn the "first language" and, therefore, cannot proceed with learning a "second language". Moreover, they consider that one of the most difficult elements of Greek is the alphabet, the grammar and the pronunciation which differs a lot from the English pronunciation. Students who start learning Greek from kindergarten, though, have a significant advantage over others who are re-registered from other schools and attend a higher grade. Most students do not see a connection between Greek and English and they don't have the opportunity to speak Greek in an authentic situation. Teachers know a lot about the Greek food, the customs, the Greek islands and touristic places, the Greek mythology and history, ancient Greece and its great men, and, in fact, they wish to know even more about the Greek culture, too. The first things that come to mind when they hear the word "Greece" are the Greek cuisine, the importance of family as a social group, gyros, the Greek flag, the blue and clear sea waters, the beautiful houses near the sea, the gods of Olympus, music and dancing, the Greek islands and the ancient temples. Last but not least, they know how to pronounce words like good-καλά, good morning-καλημέρα, gentleman-κύριος, lady-κυρία, algorithm-αλγόριθμος, geometry-γεωμετρία, alpha-άλφα, beta-βήτα, omega-ωμέγα,

⁴ We collected the teachers' views using the tool of interview.

thanks-ευχαριστώ, hello-γεια σου, what are you doing-τι κάνεις.

5. Conclusions

Examining the context in which Greek is taught as a “foreign” language at Plato Academy Charter School in Tampa area, we find dysfunctions and shortcomings but above all we notice the degradation of the Greek courses compared to the other subjects. The most serious disadvantage, in our opinion, is the absence of a curriculum and books. The teaching is carried out in a superficial manner, emphasizing on some aspects of the Greek culture without giving importance to the actual learning of the language. For this reason, according to the findings of our research, the students of the 8th grade, after 9 years of learning Greek as a “foreign” language on a daily mandatory basis, are still at the beginner level with very limited vocabulary and communication skills. Students lose interest in the Greek language as they grow up and especially since they are not informed about the prospect of obtaining a certificate of language proficiency. The teachers of Greek, other than the ones appointed by the Greek state have no pedagogical training and knowledge of teaching a foreign language and, thus, their contribution is limited to an occasional and fragmented teaching, using mainly the English language, without any particular plan trying to fill the time with some kind of activities. Teachers appointed by the Greek State are also forced to follow this path, facing a lack of a detailed curriculum, as well as responsible and organized guidance. The Greek authorities and the Education Coordinators have no information over the goals of each school and the working conditions of the seconded teachers for whom they should be responsible. The Greek teachers with sufficient experience and teaching qualifications⁵ teach under the role of a “free”⁶ teacher within a curriculum that aims more to maintain the existing situation rather than to improve it. In our era, with the enormous potential of technology, the Greek state by means of its institutions could play a leading role and have control over the operation of the Greek departments, especially those integrated into a foreign education system in order to upgrade the existing framework and make the Greek language to acquire new Greek language fans.

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⁵ Greek teachers who work in the USA paid by the Greek government have high formal qualifications and a certified knowledge of English.

⁶ Without salary from the school.