The experiences of students learning Greek in a mixed-year extra-curricular club: an investigation

by Anna Barker

Introduction

While a trainee on the Cambridge Classics Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) course, I set up a lunchtime Greek club for students at my second placement school. This club became the subject of my PGCE research project. I was interested in three research areas: students’ motivation for the study of Greek; students’ perception of Greek as a subject; and students’ experiences of learning in a mixed-year environment. This article focuses on the third research area alone, exploring students’ preconceptions of what it would be like to learn in a mixed-year environment, what behaviours they displayed, and what they said about their experiences.

First, a word on context. The research was carried out in a mixed comprehensive school in north Essex. Students are in the age range of 11-18. It is a large school of 2050 students, with approximately 290 students in a year group and 570 students in the Sixth Form. The school is located on the edge of a small town close to greater London in a relatively affluent area, but is essentially rural in feel, with a catchment area that includes the surrounding villages. The school prides itself on academic achievement, branding itself in its prospectus as ‘a local school of exceptional quality.’ In 2011, 79% of students achieved five A*-C grades at GCSE including Maths and English. In its prospectus as ‘a local school of exceptional quality,’ it was described as ‘outstanding’. During my placement in spring 2012, the school was described as ‘outstanding’.

Both my PGCE placement schools offered Latin and Classical Civilisation courses, but neither offered Greek. I was determined to set up an extra-curricular Greek Club at my second placement school, in order to broaden my teaching repertoire (and because my academic interests are centred more on Greek than Latin). It was important to me that the Club would be on offer to students of any age group and academic ability. In my placement school, Latin was offered as an option only to the top linguists in Year 8, who were obliged to pay a fee for their off-timetable lessons. The offering of classical languages to a very able minority, as part of a ‘gifted and talented’ programme is not uncommon (Gibbs, 2003; Holmes-Henderson, 2008), but it was important to me that anyone who wanted to learn would be welcomed. After publicising the club in the School Bulletin and posters on corridors, the first session took place during the first week after February half term, and ran every Tuesday lunch time for 40 minutes. The research was conducted during the first six weeks of the club’s existence, namely the duration of the second half of the spring term.

Why investigate a Greek Club? It is often the case that where Greek exists in schools it is offered off-timetable: there is much anecdotal evidence of committed Greek teaching and learning carried out in this way at schools up and down the country (Garner, 2009). I hoped that my research might be of interest to other teachers in similar situations, perhaps thinking about setting up Greek or already offering it as an extra-curricular club. I do not claim here to offer any advice on how to use these environments most effectively, only to set out my experiences and prompt thought, discussion and, perhaps, further research.

Methods of data collection

The students who attended Greek Club were from a range of years and abilities. While on average there were slightly more female students than male, it was a co-educational group with no strong gender bias, and there were no students with identified SEN or EAL provision required. As this was an optional lunchtime club, it is important to note that attendance fluctuated to a certain extent. Some students did not return after the first week, while others began in week two; others could only attend the club in alternate weeks, due to the school’s two week timetable. The table below shows the attendance at the club by year group,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week 1</th>
<th>Week 2</th>
<th>Week 3</th>
<th>Week 4</th>
<th>Week 5</th>
<th>Week 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Attendance at the lunchtime Greek Club, Weeks 1-6

The poor attendance of pupils from the sixth form in Week 6 was due to their attendance at a Student Union meeting. The emphasis of the club was on learning the basics...
of Greek language, with the first two sessions focusing on the alphabet and transliteration. Subsequent lessons focused on the present tense, and nouns of the first and second declension. While most activities were quite intellectually demanding, consisting of translation of Greek to English, as well as English to Greek, the atmosphere of the club was fairly relaxed. There was no seating plan and students were not selected to answer questions but volunteered answers by putting up their hands. Resources used were a combination of those devised by Wilding (1957), Taylor (2003) and myself.

Overview of methods for data collection

My research was essentially a case-study: an in-depth consideration of a group of students in their ‘natural habitat’ of the Greek Club. I used three methods designed to collect qualitative data:

1. A questionnaire, carried out by all students who attended Greek Club in its first week

2. Observation of students at work during the sessions

3. Recorded interviews with five students, conducted in the fifth and sixth weeks after the start of the club.

In this way I collected three forms of data: written (from the questionnaires), spoken (from the interviews) and behavioural (from observation). These three different angles of looking at the Greek Club gave me a depth of insight into the project. In addition, by asking similar questions in the questionnaire and the interviews, I attempted to triangulate the data, so that I could gain a more accurate sense of students’ perspectives.

While essentially a case study, it is important to note that my research also included a small element of action research. In order to consider how students behaved when working inter-year, during the second lesson I manipulated the seating plan in the class. Instead of allowing students to sit where they chose, I gave each student a letter from the Greek alphabet, either upper case or lower case. Sixth form students were given upper case letters, while those in Key Stage 3 or 4 were given lower case letters. Students were asked to find the student with the matching letter, and sit with that person. I then observed the effect of this manipulated seating plan during the lesson, and also asked students about their experiences of it during the recorded interviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pupil</th>
<th>Year Group</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>G&amp;T</th>
<th>Key Stage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7A</td>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>KS 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11A</td>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>KS 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11B</td>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>KS 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12A</td>
<td>Year 12</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12B</td>
<td>Year 12</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Students selected for interview

Interviews

Finally, I recorded brief interviews with five students, which took place during the fifth and sixth weeks of the club. I chose a semi-structured format with three core questions that I asked all five students. On the topic of mixed-year learning, I asked each student the question: ‘What’s it been like working with students from different years?’ The semi-structured nature of the interview allowed me to expand upon interesting areas, or encourage students to release interesting or deeper answers: this flexibility of format allowed me to rephrase or clarify questions in order to get thoughtful, reasoned responses from the students.

Five students from across the key stages were selected by me to be interviewed, summarised thus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pupil</th>
<th>Year Group</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>G&amp;T</th>
<th>Key Stage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7A</td>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>KS 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11A</td>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>KS 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11B</td>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>KS 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12A</td>
<td>Year 12</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12B</td>
<td>Year 12</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interviews were carried out as far as possible into the course as time would allow. All interviews took place in the fifth or sixth weeks of the course, so that students would have more experiences to draw on. I selected two students from Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5 because there were more students from these Key Stages who regularly attended the club, and proportionally very few from Key Stage 3. I also ensured that both male and female students were selected, so that I did not receive a gender-biased perspective. I picked students who I knew had attended all of the sessions, so that they would have a fuller experience to draw upon.

Whereas the questionnaire had
measured expectations of working inter-year, given that it was completed in the first class, the interview looked more at students’ actual experiences of working inter-year. From the interviews, I wanted to gain a sense of how the students described the experience of working in a mixed-year environment.

## Findings and analysis

### Mixed-year learning: preconceptions.

All of the younger years expressed very positive views on the prospect of working with students of different years, as illustrated by the views of these two students expressed on the questionnaires:

7B: ‘Good as I could make more friends.’

7C: ‘I think it would be a good experience for learning with people who are older than me.’

Students from Key Stage 4 expressed more of a range of opinions. While there were some actively positive views, the majority expressed a sense of neutrality or lack of concern:

10A: ‘I think it will be nice – you might meet new people and there will be less of a focus on ability comparisons maybe.’

11A: ‘No objection unless there is a problematic difference in ability (but age would not necessarily be the cause for that).’

10C: ‘It should be fine because no one has done it before, so we are all starting from a similar place. Everyone’s interested in doing the same thing as well.’

When we analyse the sixth form responses, however, we see a much more prevalent sense of ambivalence or concern:

12A: ‘Might slow it down a bit, maybe stop me getting as far as I might otherwise get.’

12E: ‘Depends how mature the younger years are. It’s quite strange to be in a class with Year 7s.’

12H: ‘Tedious – they won’t be as clever as us.’

12J: ‘It’ll be embarrassing if someone five years younger than me can learn Greek better than me.’

Many sixth-formers, like the respondents from Key Stage 4, also expressed a sense of neutrality, which can be summed up by this student’s response:

12C: ‘Fine; a range of age does not bother me as long as I’m not the only one of my age.’

Only one student from the sixth form expressed a positive view of the prospect, responding that the situation was ‘Welcome, new, different, interesting’ (12I).

The data from the questionnaires suggests that there is a rough correlation between age of student and ambivalence towards working in a mixed-year environment. While the younger years expressed no concern at the prospect, there was more ambivalence at Key Stage 4, while the sixth-form respondents were mostly against the idea, believing that it would impede their progress.

### Mixed-Year learning: behaviour

For the first session of the club, students arrived at the classroom and waited outside until invited in. All students entered the class and sat in pairs from the same year group: no student was the only representative of their year group. During the first session, there were twelve sixth form students present, which made up almost half of the total group. They occupied half the classroom, so that from the teacher’s perspective the left hand side of the room was comprised of Key Stages 3 and 4, and the right hand side of sixth form. For all the remaining sessions (apart from the manipulated seating plan in Week 2), the sixth form established the right-hand side as their part of the classroom, even if they sat with different people during different weeks.

In addition, the sixth form students tended to gravitate towards the back of the room, whereas Key Stage 3 always opted to sit near the front of the class, and Key Stage 4 at the front left. With the exception of the manipulated seating plan, for the duration of the research all students chose to sit with members of their year group, if not always the same people, and occupied the same area of the classroom, if not always exactly the same position.

Given that this was an extracurricular activity, I wanted the atmosphere of the club to be fairly relaxed and informal, and because of this decided not to ‘pick on’ students to contribute answers to questions. Instead, students were encouraged to put up their hands in order to answer. The younger students were keen to volunteer answers than Key Stage 4 or 5 students. In the first lesson, in which the Greek alphabet was introduced, it was clear to me from monitoring that some of the sixth form students knew many of the letters of the alphabet already but were reluctant to volunteer information in front of the whole class. The students from Key Stage 3, by contrast, seemed very keen to answer questions on alphabet recognition or transliteration. This trend continued throughout the six weeks. One sixth form student made the following comment on the situation:

12B (in interview): ‘Year 7s actually want to learn some stuff, so they’re always like shouting out answers and everything, and like we’re [the sixth form] just kind of, ‘Yeah this is fun’.

Whether this attitude stems from a laziness or embarrassment on the part of the sixth-formers, or a wish to let the younger years excel is unclear.

On the second week of the club, I engineered a seating plan in order to mix up the years so that a student from Key Stage 5 would be matched with one from Key Stages 3 or 4. Students were not given any explicit instructions to help each other, although as with all the activities, I made it clear to students that they could work together. It was interesting to me that the sixth form students did not naturally help the younger ones: students seemed to close down, and the volume of productive chatter in the room was extremely low.
Previous research suggests that one of the major advantages of mixed-year learning is that younger students can ‘absorb knowledge’ from the older (Mulryan-Kyne, 2004, p.10). In the Greek class, however, the low level of engagement between pupils, as judged by them talking to each other, indicated to me that the students were very uncomfortable with this new seating plan. This impression was borne out in interviews, in which the older students seemed reluctant to help the younger students.

**Mixed-Year learning experiences**

The general impressions of the students’ experiences, as measured through interviews, were overwhelmingly neutral: the opinion of this student is representative:

11B: ‘I haven’t really noticed that it’s much different.’

Student 12B thought it was ‘weird’ being with the younger years, but ultimately that it actually enhanced her learning:

12B: ‘I think people would […] kind of mess around a bit more if it was just sixth form […] so having the other year groups there probably does make you do stuff, because the Year 7s actually, like, do the work.’

I asked the students if they would prefer it if the club was restricted to their own year group or Key Stage: four out of the five respondents concluded that they were happy the way it was. Only one interviewee expressed a strong preference for a sixth-form only club, as he thought then the pace would speed up, and the learning would be more ‘focused’ (12A). Student 7A, however, actively preferred the mixed-year environment over a Key Stage 3-only club. In general the students interviewed did not feel that their learning had been impeded by the mixed-year setting. In the words of Student 11A:

11A: ‘It doesn’t really matter who you’re with, it’s more about ability and interest in the topic rather than age, I think.’

She goes on to concede that ‘it could probably go a bit faster, but you could say that about Latin sometimes and that’s my year’.

I also asked students about their experiences and preconceptions of having an enforced mixed-year seating plan. The respondents from Key Stages 4 and 5 were unanimous in their disapproval of this:

11A: ‘When we had that seating plan last time, I was next to a sixth former who I didn’t really know, and he obviously wasn’t interested in getting to know me, and that was a bit awkward [laughter], so I think that was a negative, definitely, but if it was someone I was friendly with/ But I think it’s more, if you sit next to your friend it’s nicer, and I know you should really like branch out a bit, but sometimes it can have a deterrent effect.’

Another student was emphatic that she would not prefer a mixed-year seating plan:

12B: ‘Because it would be really awkward to be put with someone who was in a lower or higher year group than you who you’d never met before, if you were just kind of thrown together it would be really uncomfortable I think.’

Again, the only student who expressed any positivity towards this idea was 7A. I asked the older students if it would make any difference if they were explicitly given the role of ‘teacher’ to their younger seating partner, hoping that the older students would see this as a good opportunity to consolidate their own learning. 12B conceded that it would be much more comfortable for all concerned in this situation. While 12A thought this pairing would clearly impede his own progress, 11B saw some potential in the scheme:

11B: ‘It might be quite good to be sort of teaching it whilst you learn […] ‘cause one of my friends had missed the lesson and I was telling her about the, I think it was the verbs…It was quite good when you’d just learnt it because it’s fresh in your mind and you can think of a way to explain it, that’s easy to understand immediately.’

In conclusion, the students interviewed did not seem to conceive of the mixed-year setting as radically different from their ‘normal’ classes, because they were sitting with their friends of the same age group, nor did they seem to feel that their progress had been impeded by learning alongside students who were older or younger. Finally, I was pleased that the students commented on a positive sense of atmosphere within the club. The mixed-year setting clearly had not created a strained environment:

11A: ‘It’s quite nice to have something more, not exactly laid-back, but it’s separate from a normal class, and it’s more of a, like, friendly feel in some ways.’

12B: ‘It feels like a friends-meeting-up club.’

For me as a teacher, the mixed-year environment also created a relaxed, family feel: in many ways I enjoyed teaching this class of students more than some of regular, single-year classes.

**Conclusion**

On the prospect of working in a mixed-year environment, opinions differed according to age. The younger year groups were much keener about the prospect than the sixth form students. Students naturally sat with members of their year group: when encouraged to do otherwise there was very little interaction between students. When interviewed, older students expressed a strong opposition to sitting with younger students, unless they were given the explicit role of teaching or supporting the younger ones. In general, students seemed to have had positive experiences of learning at the club, reporting that their learning had not been impeded and that they liked the friendly and relaxed atmosphere.

This project encouraged me to be attuned to student-student interactions in the classroom, and student participation, developing my skills as an observer. It also encouraged me to be a good listener. I really enjoyed interviewing the students and hearing them reflect on their experiences. Over and above answering my research questions, the interviews and questionnaires gave me an insight into how students feel about working more
generally.

Given the generally positive experiences of the students, it seems that mixed-year environments could be used effectively to teach students in schools with few specialist classics teachers. I would like to see more research on mixed-year environments focusing on students’ perspectives, over a more sustained period of time than my small project.

Anna Barker is a Classics teacher in a London Grammar School.

References


1 SEN: Special Educational Needs.

2 EAL: English as an Additional Language.