

## Research Article

# Greek Club: Resurrecting Dead Languages in Secondary Schools

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### Abstract

This paper explores the merits of learning classical languages in an informal environment. It is argued that voluntary clubs offer a variety of benefits for students and teachers and may help promote the longevity of the discipline. For teachers, clubs can be a flexible way to teach Greek or Latin to the next generation in schools that may not be willing to offer one or both languages as subjects in the formal curriculum. For students, clubs can be an opportunity to learn freely and forgivingly in a relaxed and non-pressurised environment; an informal Greek club can help develop the skills of students formally learning Latin. Language clubs can also be used to make Classics more accessible into the future, as dated ideas of Classics being exclusive to only the most privileged and bright students can be disposed of. In this paper the author shall draw on her own experience as well as the experiences of students and teachers in Australia and abroad.

**Key words:** informal learning, ancient Greek, Latin, primary schools, secondary schools

### Introduction

Many teachers, students, and enthusiasts have heard comments like, ‘Latin and Greek are dead languages, what’s the point of studying them?’ Most reply by patiently explaining how enriching the study of the Classics is, while internally restraining an eye-roll. However, I sometimes feel sympathetic towards such commentators. They are evidently not aware that in the right circumstances, Greek and Latin can be resurrected. For my part, I have witnessed the resurrection of Greek twice a week at a secondary school ‘Greek Club’ on the North Shore of Sydney, Australia. Let me paint the scene: It is Friday lunchtime on a hot December afternoon. A group of middle-school boys are sitting together eating sandwiches, electronic tablets open with Greek text in front of them. Suddenly, the sound of the Greek definite article table set to an acoustic rendition of Boney M’s song *Ra Ra Rasputin* rings out of the door and into the quadrangle. I marvel that Ancient Greek could ever be thought dead.

### Clubs in Sydney, Australia

To begin, the experiences of two teachers in NSW shall be outlined. The first example is the Barker College Greek Club. In 2013 Matthew Ross, the head of Languages at Barker College Hornsby, set up an extra-curricular Greek Club after two years of hosting one at his previous school. In 2018 the author began assisting Mr. Ross. According to Mr. Ross, three key aims underpinned the foundation of the Greek Club. Firstly, to expose interested kids to Hellenistic history, culture, and thought. Secondly, to support the ability of Latin students to read and analyse Latin by introducing them to

similar grammatical and linguistic concepts in Greek. Thirdly, to encourage able and willing students to consider pursuing ancient Greek to an advanced level such as the Higher School Certificate (HSC) with an external tutor (as the school does not teach Greek as a timetabled subject).

There are currently two groups split by year group (year 9 and year 11) who meet separately twice a week. The textbook *Athenaze* is primarily used, and sometimes supplemented by other texts. Mr. Ross said that ‘the students who attend a languages club are volunteers and generally exhibit a high level of interest and engagement in the course’. Asked what advice he had for teachers interested in establishing a languages club, he suggested teachers ‘work to keep all the stakeholders (e.g. school administration) onside and think carefully about the expectations that you want the kids to follow in terms of homework and regular work that you want the kids to put into learning the language outside of your set meeting times’. The children need to feel that they have ownership of the direction of the club, so that it is something they want to participate in, rather than something that they are forced to do. In the author’s experience, this model has been effective. Splitting the groups by age for regular work and occasionally reuniting the groups for shared activities is an effective way to create a sense of community. It is also important to have flexible alternative paths for students who want to take their studies further. For example, in New South Wales (NSW) the Macquarie University Ancient Languages School is an opportunity for students to further their Greek outside of the club if they wish.

Furthermore, I received correspondence about the experiences of Mary Triantafyllou in operating two Latin clubs which she inherited at different schools. The clubs were open to primary school students and ran once a week. She found that what worked with one school did not necessarily work with the other - she based her teaching of the students of her first Latin club on a textbook, supplemented by the *Cambridge Latin Course*. A memorable

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experience was learning the carol *Jingle Bells* in Latin for the children to perform at the school's Christmas production in 2016. Ms. Triantafyllou found that the textbook did not suit students at her next school, and she was challenged by the varied ages of the club's members. She wrote, 'for a Latin club, the top priority is enjoyment, not speed of achievement'. After an enriching experience observing a teacher on her practical placement, Ms. Triantafyllou altered her method 'to incorporate more etymology and derivatives into lessons. This was great as the students had a skill transferable to English and one they could show their parents at home.' She ceased use of the textbook and focused instead on weekly themes such as weather and feelings, and branched out to mythology and Harry Potter spells. For her, the benefit of the club environment is flexibility, a focus on entertaining and engaging content, the ability to include more mythology, and the 'low stakes environment for kids'. She encourages teachers of language clubs to use weekly themes and to establish an adaptable learning schedule where students can catch up if they must miss a meeting. Tailor class content to student interests such as Percy Jackson or Harry Potter. Use an age-appropriate textbook like *Minimus* and incorporate culture-only lessons about mythology or history.

There are key similarities between what Mr. Ross and Ms. Triantafyllou describe about classical language clubs. Evidently, student engagement and interest are paramount to the success of these clubs. It is necessary to adopt a flexible attitude and methodology to attend to the diverse needs of students. The use of comparative linguistics is clearly beneficial for creating a 'real-world' application of both Greek and Latin. It would appear that clubs are becoming an increasingly popular method of teaching these languages in schools. These teachers developed their language clubs without consultation with one another, and yet, their comments demonstrate a unity in purpose. The next section of this paper will more closely examine the benefits of an informal teaching environment.

### Why teach Greek in a club?

Work overseas illustrates the efficacy of learning classics in an informal environment. In the UK, a charity called the Primary Latin Project aids schools in setting up Greek and Latin programs. Since 1999 they have offered the *Minimus* Latin course, designed to be taught by non-specialists in timetabled classes and after-school clubs. Similarly, the Museum of Classical Archaeology at Cambridge has set up Latin clubs at five primary schools with over 50 students taking part – teacher Jennie Thornber, who set up the program, writes, 'Let's not forget: these children have chosen to stay after school to attend the club; with a busy day of school already under their belt, it's important that we make these sessions fun' (Thornber, 2018). Indeed, the fun and informal nature of a club is key to its success. Furthermore, Anne Wright, a teacher at the Hereford Cathedral School in England, has run a Greek club there since 2015. She writes that 'A Greek Club gives you the freedom to explore widely, without the pressure of syllabus demands' (Wright, 2015). Unlike the Australian clubs discussed above, the Hereford Cathedral School's club is open to external members, which may foster an even larger community of language learners who may not have the opportunity to learn Greek at their own school. Greek generally has a reputation for being more difficult than Latin due to the use of a foreign script. The situation of a club which does not include formal assessment likely reduces student stress about the difficulty of studying Greek.

Hence, the idea of an ancient language club appears rather modern and increasingly popular in Australia and in the UK. The author is aware of a fluctuating number of Latin clubs in NSW. Few schools in NSW teach ancient Greek, and the Classics appear to be

increasingly set aside by schools which are not certain of its value or relevance. The study of Ancient History is also on the decline with a 40% drop in HSC enrolments over the last 10 years according to the NSW Education Standards Authority (Chrysanthos, 2020). While the study of Ancient History and Classics does not always go together in schools, this may point to a trend away from the study of the ancient world. In comparison, the numbers for Modern History have steadily increased (Chrysanthos, 2020). The reason for this is believed to be young people's growing interest in modern politics and current affairs. What schools are not always aware of is the value of ancient studies for understanding the modern world – for example, in studying Ancient Greek these students have learnt about the historic and linguistic roots of democracy. Studying Classics also has a tremendous impact on students' literacy. In the UK, researchers Evelin Bracke and Ceri Bradshaw of Swansea University reviewed a century of US data on the impact of learning Latin and found that Latin is proven to aid vocabulary, comprehension, and reading development of first language English pupils – especially in primary schools and in low socio-economic areas (Bracke & Bradshaw, 2020).

Indeed, it can be argued that offering classical language clubs increases the accessibility of studying ancient languages. In the UK there has been a push to expand Latin teaching in state schools. The Classics for All program works through 16 regional classics networks to target schools in areas of low social mobility, offering support establishing clubs or timetabled classes. For example, primary school teacher Laura Hossack set up a club in Leeds with their support, and 'immediately saw the project's potential to enhance the learning of all her pupils, and particularly those identified as gifted and talented' (Forrest, 2018).

An extra-curricular language club is thus an innovative way that language teachers might overcome the impediments of ancient languages and make Classics accessible to children from a broader range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Schools which may not have the ability to provide classes in Latin or Ancient Greek might be able to establish a club. For instance, while Barker College offers Latin, it does not offer Ancient Greek. However, after attending the club from years 8-12, one student enjoyed Greek so much that the school engaged an external teacher to teach him HSC Ancient Greek and Greek extension. This student excelled, achieving second place for Greek in New South Wales in the 2020 HSC. This was a major testament to the value of the Greek Club and the initiative of Mr Ross in establishing it, as it is highly likely that without the club the student would not have studied Ancient Greek at all. This student is now studying Ancient Greek at a tertiary level. So, in terms of aiding the longevity of classical studies, these opportunities are important. In Aotearoa New Zealand, Latin was discontinued at all National Certificate of Education Achievement (NCEA) levels due to the steadily declining number of enrolments (Hipkins, 2020). It is the author's view that the promotion of classical language clubs is one way that schools can continue to foster communities of Latin and Greek language-learners so that the study of these languages continues.

### Methodology

It has already been suggested that the balance between formal language learning and 'fun' offered by a club environment is one reason why the Greek Club is so successful. Let us examine this in greater detail. The Barker College Greek Club uses Balm and Lawall's textbook *Athenaze*, which introduces students to grammar and Greek culture in small measures. We have found this textbook excellent in having students read Greek from an early point. Over

the last three years I have had the pleasure of introducing senior school students to their first excerpts of 'real' Greek and we have enjoyed discussing and debating the moral and philosophical ideas at play. In 2019, the Greek Club performed an excerpt of Aristophanes' *Frogs* for a Languages Night. The play gave the students an opportunity to read and perform original Ancient Greek, and to demonstrate to their peers, family and school community the value of learning ancient languages. But perhaps what the club is most famous for is the singing of songs, which are a fun way for students to learn grammar.

Though we do not assess students in the club, milestones such as the Year 9 languages night and Greek Reading Competition open to students in NSW provide students with goals to work towards and a sense of achievement. In 2019 we had several students from the club compete in the Reading Competition. At the beginning of 2021 the school hosted a classics night, at which the younger group of students performed a short play based on a story from the textbook. The older group read (in the original Greek) the opening of Homer's *Odyssey* in unison, with surtitles provided for the audience. This was another meaningful opportunity for the members of the club to share their progress with others.

### Student Reflections

I hope to have shown that an informal languages club offers a unique opportunity to teach Greek or Latin in an accessible environment. I performed a brief survey of past and present students of the Barker College Greek Club, as I was interested to see how Mr Ross' initial intentions in setting up the Greek Club aligned with the experiences of the students. Asked why they joined the club, several students said that they felt it would be beneficial for their study of Latin and in broadening their understanding of linguistics. One said, 'it was something different, seemed a rare opportunity and there was nothing to lose by trying it'. A couple were interested in Greek mythology and history, while one student frankly stated, 'A friend was doing it'. But why do the students stay on in the club? Asked what they enjoy about the Club, one student said 'it is a great chance to learn about Ancient Greek culture and language in a relaxed environment. This enables [me] to focus on pursuing interest and enjoyment'. The mental challenge of Greek was enjoyed by several students, as were 'the stories, the learning experience and most of all the songs'. Students valued 'The sense of community' and ability to better understand the roots of modern English.

The final question asked in the survey was, 'What have you found valuable about learning the Ancient Greek language?' Almost every student mentioned that Ancient Greek has improved their general understanding of language and English literacy, including vocabulary, spelling, and writing. They felt a sense of achievement in translating real fragments of Ancient Greek and in mastering the Greek alphabet, as well as improvements in analytical thinking. One student said: 'Although learning and translating Ancient Greek seems obscure in the 21st century, it has far-reaching consequences and uses in mathematics, the English language, and, most importantly, impressing (and not boring) people.'

### Conclusion

It is possible to teach broader and better through language clubs. Changing times require flexibility - it is possible to make Ancient

Greek modern and fun, even for the teachers. I conclude with several suggestions for those wishing to set up a Greek or Latin club. The first is that while teaching Greek to Latin students appears to be tremendously helpful, it is worthwhile teaching Greek in a Greek Club in its own right, and teachers should consider admitting students who do not study Latin, and vice versa. This is how barriers of privilege persisting around the study of Greek and Latin might be dismantled, ensuring the longevity of Latin and Greek in Australian schools. Secondly, I would like to emphasise the benefit of avoiding serious assessment of the students through tests, unless the ethos of the club is such that this is appropriate. The element of fun cannot be underestimated for maintaining student involvement. I hope to have shown that if Greek and Latin are 'dead languages', they may surely be resurrected in language clubs.

An earlier version of this paper was originally presented at the 42<sup>nd</sup> annual meeting of the Australasian Society for Classical Studies (ASCS), which took place online in February 2021.

### Notes

- 1 There is limited scholarship on this topic. The author recognises that the author's reliance on empirical experience may be a limitation and encourages further research in this area.
- 2 Many thanks to Matthew Ross for establishing and overseeing the Greek Club and his ongoing support of the author.
- 3 Matthew Ross, 'Greek Club Questions - Classicum Article'. E-mail message to Caitlin McMenamin, 30/6/2021. Many thanks to Matthew Ross for providing this and the below information *per litteras*.
- 4 Mary Triantafyllou, 'Latin Club'. E-mail message to Caitlin McMenamin, 16/7/2021. Many thanks to Mary Triantafyllou in providing this and the below information *per litteras*.
- 5 See Primary Latin Project: <https://www.primarylatinproject.org/minimus>.
- 6 See Primary Latin Project: <https://www.primarylatinproject.org/>.
- 7 See Primary Latin Project: <https://www.primarylatinproject.org/minimus>.
- 8 See Classics For All: <https://classicsforall.org.uk>. 9 All responses given below are taken from McMenamin, C. 'Greek Club Survey', December 2020.

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