

Research Article

Forum

“Educare all’Antico”. Teaching Classical Civilisation in Italian primary and lower secondary schools

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to offer an overview of an educational project that brought Classical Civilisation to pupils in the Pisa area between 2004 and 2009, through a cooperation between the Department of Classical Philology at our University and the Provincial Administration of Pisa.¹ The project was aimed at pupils of primary and lower secondary schools, in response to a thorough reform of the Italian school system that excluded some pupils from studying Greek and Roman civilisations in as much depth as other parts of history. This article will first provide an overview of the Italian education system and its recent reforms, after which the project *Educare all’Antico* will be discussed.

Keywords: Classics, Teaching, Primary School, Lower Secondary School, Reforms, Italian Education in Classics

The place of Classics in the Italian education system

The Italian education system is mainly a public state system and includes three stages after pre-primary school:

- 1 Primary school (pupils aged 6 to 10)
- 2 Secondary education, divided between:
 - 2a Lower secondary (*Scuola secondaria di primo grado*): three years, for pupils aged 11 to 13)
 - 2b Upper secondary (*Scuola secondaria di secondo grado*): five years, for pupils aged 14 to 18)

One of the school types available at the level of upper secondary education is the *liceo classico*, in which both Latin and Greek are taught for five years. This school type mainly has its roots in the Prussian *Gymnasium*, and its history would offer a long and interesting discussion (especially regarding the history of teaching Classics throughout Europe).² However, for our purpose we only need mention that enrolments in *liceo classico* have been decreasing continuously in the past 30 years:³ more and more pupils are now choosing other school types, such as technical schools and the *liceo scientifico*,⁴ in which Greek is not taught and pupils also have the possibility to avoid the study of Latin.⁵

The educational landscape is changing, and various causes are responsible.⁶ Those who say that Greek and Latin are no longer up-to-date nor useful in an era of computers and social

networks are perhaps not aware that the public debate on the so-called usefulness of Latin and ancient Greek is as old as the Italian education system itself (Montevocchi and Raicich, 1995, pp. 181–82).

In our opinion and experience, an extensive reform of Italian school *curricula* approved in 2003 by the then Minister Letizia Moratti played a major role in the marginalisation of classical studies, at least in the way classical civilisations are seen by many Italian pupils, whose feet so often walk on the traces and remains of Roman and (in southern Italy) Greek civilisations.⁷

The 2004 reform was also, however, the starting point for our project, which was subsequently held for five years in the Province of Pisa, thanks to a cooperation between the Department of Classics of the University of Pisa, the District Council of Pisa, and local primary and lower secondary schools.

Among many other things, Moratti’s reform changed the way in which the Ancient History curriculum was to be distributed throughout the stages of pupils’ educational pathway: from then onwards, Ancient History is confined to Primary Education (fifth year, pupils aged 10). Before this reform, by contrast, Ancient History was taught again after primary school, at a deeper level.

Since the reform, Italian pupils now come across Greek and Roman civilisations only when they are 9 or 10 years old. Ancient History at this level contains a broad range of topics: Mesopotamian, Indian, Chinese, and Jewish Civilisations; Ancient Greece from the origins to the Hellenistic period; Ancient Rome from the origins to the dissolution of the Empire; and the beginning and development of Christian religion. Each of these topics is studied ‘using mythological texts and epics as well as some simple documentary sources as examples’ and reading ‘short texts specific to the cultural

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tradition of Greek, Roman and Christian civilisation with a focus on the representation of the relationship between self and others, the function of prayer, and the relationship with nature⁸: quite a big task, using just short texts as examples. As far as Greek and Roman History are concerned, these are taught in the final year of primary school, before starting a different study of History in lower secondary schools, in which a more in-depth analysis of documents and data is practised whilst studying subsequent periods, from the fall of the Roman Empire to Contemporary History.

This differentiation is crucial, because it is, in a way, tantamount to stating that Ancient History can be studied using short texts as ‘examples’, while more recent history is approached with more advanced tools and interpretations.

An introduction to *Educare all’Antico*

We hope this introduction has clarified how the Italian education system has marginalised the study of Classical antiquity. However objectionable, when we started our project, this was – and indeed still is – the educational framework within which we were operating. We decided that the problem we were facing could be turned into both a resource and an opportunity, and started a fruitful collaboration with both primary and lower secondary schools. Within the Italian education context, this was the most original aspect of our project: universities were used to cooperating with upper secondary schools, generally in the form of conferences given to final-year pupils or seminars addressed to teachers in the form of continuing education: we chose instead to cooperate directly with the first levels of school education.

We chose to name the project *Educare all’Antico* (*Teaching Antiquity*), because we wanted to emphasise the importance of the educational factor (*Teaching*) and intentionally decided to avoid the idea of ‘classico’, a word that – at least in Italian – has a strong idealising connotation, especially when referring to ancient civilisations: ‘Classical’ is something to be admired, ‘Ancient’ is something to be understood.⁹

We involved teachers in several preliminary meetings and workshops held at our university, during which we discussed the institutional aspects (the reform had just been approved, at the time) and chose the themes around which the university team was going to select Greek and Latin texts to be used and analysed by teachers with their pupils.

This ‘textual choice’ was a deliberate one. Instead of simply following pupils in what they were most acquainted with (for instance videos, videogames, coding), we chose a different strategy and printed notebooks with an old-fashioned charm to be given for free to pupils, in which they could write and draw with pencils and pens.

A team of colleagues¹⁰ teaching Latin or Greek at our university selected specific texts, translated (or adapted) them without avoiding ‘difficult’ words, but by explaining them with their etymology,¹¹ and created exercises and in-depth readings around specific themes, on pages designed specifically for young pupils (squared pages for drawings, ruled pages for writing and listing new words etc).

We printed four notebooks: 1. *Quaderno di cultura greca* (‘Notebook on Greek culture’); 2. *Quaderno di cultura romana* (‘Notebook on Roman culture’); 3. *I viaggi, il viaggio* (‘Travels, travel’); 4. *I miti il mito* (‘Myths, Myth’).¹² The topics presented were varied and chosen jointly with the schoolteachers, from local history (the arrival of Rutilius Namatianus on the coast near Pisa)¹³ to more general concepts (such as Justice, starting from a reading of the

Hesiodic passage of *The Hawk and the Nightingale* and his quarrel with his brother; the idea of Family in Ancient Greece, starting from Plato’s *Symposium*) and so on.¹⁴ A detailed table of content from *Quaderno V* can give an idea of the themes and texts discussed:

Introduction: *The journey of the ancients and moderns*.

Foreword for teachers. R. Di Donato

Text 1: *The monster that does not welcome guests: the Cyclops* (Od. IX 112 ff.), A. Taddei

Text 2: *Travelling to the edge of the world* (Hdt. IV 16, 23–4), A. Taddei

Text 3: *Xerxes’ journey to Greece* (Hdt. VI 33–6, A. Pers. 65–85), M.R. Calabrese De Feo

Text 4: *The Greek colonisation of Sicily* (Thuc. VI 3–5, Diod. Sic. V 6), M.R. Calabrese De Feo

Text 5: *The retreat of the ten thousand* (Xen. An. IV 5, 3–5; 13–5, IV 7, 21–2), M.R. Calabrese De Feo

Text 6: *Aeneas’ journey* (Verg. *Aen.* II 268–97, 707–804), A. Cotrozzi

Text 7: *A journey in Italy* (Hor. *Sat.* I 5), R. Ferri

Text 8: *Hannibal crosses the Alps* (Liv. *Hist.* XXI 35), P. Pieroni

Text 9: *Journey to a land on the edge of the empire* (Ov. *Trist.* I 10), F. Lechi

Text 10: *St Paul’s journey to Rome* (Act. 27: 14–28:6), R. Ferri

Text 11: *Arrival in Pisa* (Rutil. *Nam. De red.* 527–40), C. O. Tommasi

In order to give an idea of the work we had been doing, a very short outline of the first text listed in the table of contents shown above may be useful. The text bears the title *The monster that does not welcome strangers: the Cyclops* and it is a reading of the renowned passage in *Odyssey* IX (vv. 112–272, *passim*) in which the island of the Cyclopes is described and Polyphemus speaks to Odysseus, who starts to deceive the monster. We have adopted, and adapted, a printed and widely known translation of some passages,¹⁵ added some notes (for instance about the reason why Greek galleys have the epithet ‘with cheeks of vermilion’)¹⁶ and explained some divergences and adaptations from the translation.¹⁷

The translation of each text is followed by a ‘*Reading guide*’ in which some crucial cultural issues are explored (such as thinking Otherness, describing civilised and non-civilised people according to Ancient Greek standards, sea travels in Ancient Greece), taking into account topics also covered in different chapters and aiming to encourage discussions on themes that were perceived as ‘personal’ in multi-cultural classes, in which one third of the students were not mother-tongue Italian speakers.

We encouraged reflections on how the past reflects on present themes but avoided any direct analogies between Roman and Greek civilisations, on one side, and classical and modern civilisations (because what is ‘classical’ civilisation? What is ‘modern’ civilisation?), on the other. Diachrony and difference have been leading themes in ‘teaching teachers to teach’ Classics to young pupils. We deliberately chose not to go directly into the schools (except for meetings and the final feedback) because this option would have become a sort of ‘conference’ given to pupils we did not know, thus lacking the right competences. However, in each meeting with the teachers we stressed the importance of considering diachrony as one of the most important cornerstones of the work at hand: Homer is not Plutarch, nor Vergil or Horace, because they reflect different forms of thought and forms of society. In Italy, there is a widespread tendency (in schools, in newspapers, on TV) to regard Antiquity as a sturdy monolith devoid of any

internal differences, especially in the case of the so-called (and non-existent) ‘Graeco-Roman civilisation’. Our ideal target were not would-be philologists or archaeologists: we were and still are thinking of (for example) a pupil who, after lower secondary school, chooses a technical upper secondary school and then becomes (for example) a tour operator: having the right competences she or he will obtain a larger portion of market, if the point is the ‘usefulness’ of competences in Classics!

This leads us to a second topic we had been considering: the importance of working directly with sources, with some basic words and ideas explained (words like *δική* [justice], *ἄνθρωπος* [mankind], concepts such as ‘patronymics’) mainly through etymology in different languages. As a starting point for each lesson, we focused on the texts, not on general themes: working on the ‘original’ text, instead of reading summaries, adaptations or rewritings, gives pupils the feeling of examining sources, considering how information comes to us, and it also allows them to develop a critical eye when facing fake news.

When dealing with the episode of the Cyclops, pupils were guided by their teachers in analysing a tale most of them already knew through childhood books, comics, cartoons, sometimes even films, but from a different point of view: not simply the horrific and fantastic story of a giant monster who eats men, but a document that – through this fantastic story, very much appreciated by young pupils – can show how the Ancient Greeks of the archaic and classical period used to see (and construct) ‘otherness’ and the way to behave with strangers and hosts. We let the monster enter the classroom – to quote the title of the conference in which these ideas were first presented – but asked the monster to do what *we* wanted.

Throughout meetings with teachers, we kept on asking for possible corrections and new needs as felt by new pupils and teachers: this proved to be a useful feedback cycle in which ancient texts fed new needs and curiosities, brought to the university team by schoolteachers who worked with us to shape new texts. We started from Family, Friendship, Love and arrived at Travels, Myth and Archaeology.

At the end of the project, a general conference and exposition were organised, during which materials (artefacts, drawings, PowerPoint slides) made by pupils were displayed. In addition, a conference was held by the Project Coordinator who, addressing the students directly, talked about (dis)continuities between Greek civilisation and Italian culture, with a particular focus on southern Italy, its music and its language; this was made possible by listening to a popular song in Griko language, a song full of words with Greek roots.¹⁸

It was a wonderful day due to the overwhelming reaction of many very young pupils. The funds raised to finance the project were entirely used to print the material for schools and pupils, distributed for free. Therefore, the project ended with the end of the financing. Apart from the extraordinary success with pupils who took part in the project, the main achievement of this experience was an increase of enrolments in *licei* in the district of Pisa after the end of the project.

After that experience, we moved on to working with upper secondary schools and, for the past two years, we have been using IT tools developed by Federico Boschetti (CNR-ILC) to tag ancient texts in their original language, with different aims and results.¹⁹

Conclusion

The main achievement of our project was, in our opinion, that younger pupils were introduced to ancient history by means of ancient source texts.

A European network of projects introducing elements of Latin and Greek languages at primary or, in the Italian system at least, lower secondary school could mark a turning point for the so-called and often repeated ‘importance of Classics’, and encourage pupils to discover new languages, new literatures, and new cultures.

Notes

1 The Project was conceived by Riccardo Di Donato, who was at the time Director of the Department of Classical Philology and has been the Project Coordinator for its entire duration. Andrea Taddei was the Scientific Secretary of the Project.

2 On this point see Di Donato (1999, pp. 215–17; 2007, pp. 193–202), Lanza (2005), Napolitano (2017) and Condello (2018).

3 Between 2013 and 2017, there was a drop in enrolment of over 10% in just four years (from about 173,000 to circa 140,000). This trend has continued in recent years. Only 6.7% of pupils enrolled in the *liceo classico* in 2020–2021, 6.5% in 2021–2022, 6.2% in 2022–2023 and 5.8 in 2023/2024. There is a difference between the South (where percentages of enrolments in *liceo classico* are higher, e.g. 10.6% in Sicily, and 10.3% in Calabria) and the North (where fewer pupils are choosing the *liceo classico*: e.g. Emilia Romagna has percentages as low as 3.8%, and Veneto 4.1%). Detailed information may be found here: <https://www.miur.gov.it/-/iscrizioni-all-anno-scolastico-2023-2024-i-primi-dati-in-aumento-le-domande-agli-istituti-tecnici-il-57-1-sceglie-i-licei> (accessed 5th May 2023). In comparison, in 1924–1925 34% of pupils were enrolled in the *liceo classico* (Condello, 2018, pp. 57 & 113 where further useful data may be found).

4 For the first time, in school year 2022–2023 there will be more enrolments in technical schools than in *licei*.

5 There is also a drastic decrease (–0.9% in just one year, compared to 2021–2022) in the number of those enrolling in the *liceo scientifico*, as well as a drop in the number of pupils who study Latin (–1.1% compared to 2021–2022).

6 For a recent overview, see Canfarotta *et al.* (2022), with further bibliography.

7 Letizia Moratti was Minister of Education when Silvio Berlusconi was Prime Minister (2001–2005, 2005–6). The reform named after her was approved by law no. 53 of March 28th 2003 (see also *Allegato B*, DLgs 19.2004, n. 59). On the public discussion that led to these legislative enactments, see Di Donato (2007, pp. 83–92).

8 My translations of passages from «Allegato B», section ‘History’ (see previous note).

9 On this point, see Di Donato (1990, 1992).

10 In addition to us, Annamaria Cotrozzi, Maria Raffaella Calabrese de Feo, Rolando Ferri, Francesca Lechi, Paolo Pieroni and Chiara Ombretta Tommasi worked on the project.

11 See, for example, the note at the word *Ettoride* (Εκτοριδην, at *Iliad* VI 301 in Giovanni Cerri’s translation, Milan 1996): ‘Hectorides is a patronym, that is the representation of a person through the name of the father. The addition of the suffix “-ides” to the proper name characterises the representation: Ectorides is the son of Hector (i.e. Astyanax), Peleides is the son of Peleus (Achilles), and Cronides is the son of Cronus (Zeus)’.

12 *Educare all’Antico* n. 1: *Quaderno di cultura greca* – 2005 (ISBN 8846713842); *Educare all’Antico* n. 2: *Quaderno di cultura romana* – 2005 (ISBN 884671384); *Educare all’Antico* n. 4: *I miti, il mito* – 2006 (ISBN 9788846717092); *Educare all’Antico* n. 5: *I viaggi, il viaggio* – 2009 (ISBN 9788846723635). Number 3 and 6 of the series are monographs: *Educare all’Antico* n. 3: R. Di Donato, *L’Arca di Noè. Contributi a una riforma della scuola*, 2007 (Di Donato, 2007); *Educare all’Antico* n. 5: A. Taddei, *Testi e contesti. Per una didattica del greco nei nuovi licei classici*, 2011 (Taddei, 2011).

13 C. O. Tommasi, *Arrivo a Pisa*, in *Quaderno V. I Viaggi, il viaggio*, 103–9 (discussing Rutil. Nam. *De red.* 527–40, 449–90).

14 See *La giustizia degli antichi Greci*, in *Quaderno I. Quaderno di cultura greca*, 15–22 and *Mariti e mogli in Grecia antica, ibidem*, 29–36 (discussing Hes. *Op.* 202–11, 274–85 and Plato, *Symp.* 179 b2–10.).

15 At the time, the translation of G. A. Privitera (Milan 1991) was one of the better-known translations available in libraries and bookshops.

16 See *Odyssey* IX 125.

17 ‘Honoured strangers’ as translation of *ξείνοισιν ἄμ’ αἰδοίοισιν* in lines 271–72 (*Ζεὺς δ’ ἐπιτιμήτωρ ἱκετῶν τε ξείνων τε, ξείνιος, δς ξείνοισιν ἄμ’ αἰδοίοισιν ὀηδεῖ.*) becomes, in Italian, «stranieri che sono *sempre* degni di

rispetto» with the addition of an adverb that requires an explanation: «*La traduzione 'che sono sempre degni di rispetto' forza un po' il testo greco, che dice semplicemente (ma sta proprio nella semplicità del greco il punto) 'gli stranieri degni di rispetto'. Per i Greci lo straniero e l'ospite erano degni di rispetto in quanto tali, non solo in condizioni determinate, come una traduzione ' il dio che scorta gli stranieri degni di rispetto' potrebbe invece fare pensare.*»). The role of Zeus Xenios is then taken into account in the 'Guide for the reading' (pp. 10–11).

18 Praisón Jelonta by Ghetonia. The song can be listened on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1l7W2NklSHQ>, with lyrics (with a translation in Italian here: <https://www.ciuricepedi.it/praison-jelonta-cammina-a-testa-alta/> (both accessed 5th May 2023)). On Griko, see now Pellegrino (2021).

19 For an overview on Euporia Project, see <https://ojs.cimedoc.uniba.it/index.php/fc/article/view/1381> (accessed 5th May 2023). On the most recent experience with secondary schools see Crucitti *et al.* (2021).

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