

Introductory Notes for the Ushers

*(a version revised a few days after the 'first night' on 11 June 2012
for use in the preparation of subsequent performances)*

The distinctive feature of this Workshop is that it focuses on one poem.

The pupils will store it in their memory, having learned to love it, to understand it, to write its sounds, and having been made intensely aware of the individual sounds and intonation patterns of Greek.

It will be like receiving a golden half sovereign on the day of your birth (as my mother did) as opposed to getting a penny a week pocket money from the age of five (as my father did), which means you wouldn't be the owner of ten shillings and sixpence until you were nearly eight. It will be a tiny piece of gold, beautiful, that will never tarnish, or be devalued by inflation, or become obsolete.

(I hope the first half of this 'parable' makes sense, but just in case (cf. Matthew, 13. 34-36)... The delayed pocket money, in dirty coppers, now valueless, given one at a time, is like the traditional way of teaching Greek. One wasn't allowed to begin before the age of 13 (or later), and all the paradigms and irregular verbs etc. had to be memorised for three years before one was invited to 'construe' or 'parse' (terrifying words) the first passage of real Greek poetry or prose).

A snatch of poetry, rediscovered on opening my Tennyson serendipitously on 16 June, helps to reinforce the parable of the half-guinea:

[*The Conquering Hero*] henceforth [shall be]
**A hallow'd memory like the names of old,
A centr'd, glory-circled memory,
And a peculiar treasure, brooking not
Exchange or currency**

(Lover's Tale, I, Oxford Tennyson, p. 448)

Pedagogically speaking, the novelty is that we shall follow as closely as possible the natural sequence of language learning.

The newborn baby starts to breathe by uttering a cry which is full of meaning to the mother. For months it will croon the speech melodies it hears around it, varying the shape of its vocal cavities to reproduce different vowels. Then it begins to chop up the flow with consonants (*m* and *d*) until it produces syllables. Slowly it attaches meaning to certain syllables, at which point they become words that produce an effect on the hearer (*mummy, daddy, no, again*). Then it becomes capable of stringing words together and will understand and generate phrases/sentences. This is the process we'll be shadowing in a speeded-up form.

The First Session of 90 minutes

A. Tunes, rhythms, timbre

First they'll hear and be asked to sing the opening phrase of an unfamiliar melody (a real piece of music) to remind them how easily they pick up intervals, note lengths and rhythms, and how easily they can learn a tune by heart.

Next they'll practise imitating the all-important speech tunes, different in every language, used in German, French and Modern Greek to say: "Good morning, how do you do".

After which they'll imitate Christos's rhythm and intonation as he delivers the first line of the poem in Ancient Greek.

(They'll be doing these imitations at their own table under the guidance of the ushers, so there will be quite a lot of babble going on).

B. Introduction to the play and the situation (with illustrations on screen)

A quick interlude will come at this point.

I'll tell them (with projected images) about the context of the poem-cum-play, doing it very simply and minimally, with the aid of the drawings provided by Joao Abreu, so that they can visualise some soldiers outside the great gate of a walled city, addressing the citizens on the walls above.

Then we begin the study of the language.

C. Hearing the sounds of the opening words

They'll listen to Christos speaking the sounds/syllables of the first two words in the two poem, having by now got a first rough idea of their meaning in the context.

They'll practise saying these two words exactly like him, working at their tables in a group of four and always guided by their 'usher'.

They'll be helped to hear and produce the two different sounds of *alpha*, the trill of the *rho*, the hissed final *sigma* and even the unaspirated initial *pi* and *tau* (as in French and Italian and MG). If we dwell on this last subtlety, it will be in order to divert them with the demonstration of the lighted match: once seen, never forgotten.

D. Writing the sounds of the opening words

Only then will they begin to use their eyes and their hands, that is, to read and write, and to learn the alphabet.

Notice, they will not be taught the whole alphabet at once, in alphabetical order, lower case and capitals. They will begin by acquiring just the seven letters they happen to need in order to write down the sounds they've learned in the two words, and these as they occur in syllables, and no more than two letters at a time.

Christos will demonstrate to the whole class, on the board, exactly how to write each letter in turn.

Then they'll practise writing each letter in turn on specially ruled paper, at their table, in their group, under the eye of the usher in charge.

A note on the accents and the 'marks of breathing'.

All the words will be pronounced with a very light dynamic stress, as in Modern Greek. Written accents will therefore be introduced from the beginning to remind them where the accent falls, but these accents will be simplified (as in MG after the spelling reform of 30 years ago). That is, they will be taught to use a single acute accent on the relevant syllable in every word of two or more syllables (perhaps making the stroke more nearly vertical than the acute as used in MG).

They will be taught to use the sign for 'rough breathing' (roughly = English *h*) where it occurs, but they will not have to insert the far more common 'smooth breathings' (absence of breathing is the default form: and it is unnecessary to write both the unmarked and the marked forms).

At a later stage (years later, perhaps) they will learn how to pepper the text with the smooth breathings as and when required to (putting one over every initial vowel that has been left unmarked).

And much later they will also learn to write the acute, grave and circumflex accents correctly in AG (which is relatively easy, provided that one knows which syllable the accent falls on — something they will have learned simultaneously with every word they hear and memorise, beginning with the very first word in the poem (*á-ra-te*, not *a-ráte*).

E. Revision of sound recognition, letter recognition (dictation and reading of syllables/words that can be written with the letters of the first line.

Revision ought to begin even at this stage, as the ushers ask them to listen to pairs of syllables, using only the sounds they have learned, to repeat the sounds, and then to write down what they have just heard and said.

After this, the ushers will perhaps write syllables (or simple words), using only these seven letters, and asking the pupils to read aloud what they'll see on the page.

Next time I must prepare these revision syllables and words carefully in advance. We did not to enough of this on 11 June 2012.

F. Continuation of processes in A to E, covering the the second line (and, just possibly, down to *basileus tês doxês*)

The second phrase of the first line of the poem, and then the second line will be worked over in the same spirit, and with the same frequent repetitions, expanding, of course, the number of sounds and letters available for revision purposes (they will have a pool of fourteen letters by this time).

The Second Session of 90 minutes

A. Revision of sounds/letters introduced in First Session.

After the break, the ushers will do more revision, at this stage introducing a few real Greek words which have remained the same, or more or less the same, in MG, and which are recognisable in their English derivatives, words like *theatron*, or the first ordinals, *prôtos*, *deuteros*, *tritos*, *tetartos*, *pemptos* or the numbers *hex* and *hepta*.

See note above about the need to prepare these words carefully in advance.

B. Informal introduction to the ‘flexion’ of words in English and Greek

Once they have warmed up again in their groups, I may vary the proceedings with the first piece of very simple exposition, taking my cue from the words *pulas* and *pulai*, *hoi* and *ho*, and *tês doxês*.

This will last not more than 3-4 minutes and will introduce them painlessly to the idea of varying, flectional forms and thus of the need for a ‘standard’ or ‘dictionary’ form of each word (masculine singular for nouns and adjectives, and first person present indicative for verbs — but of course I wouldn’t use the technical terms).

In the event, on the day, 11 June 2012, I did not attempt any exposition of this kind. It did not seem to be necessary. But the following paragraphs contain some good simple material

They need to think for a moment about how words are strung together and brought into a relationship in a phrase or sentence, and to discover that, as native speakers of English, they have unconsciously learned to indicate such relationships in five different ways:

- a) by simply arranging the words in a certain **order** (like carriages being shunted: e.g. *man bites dog* as opposed to *dog bites man*);
- b) by using little ‘**coupling** words’ (as we use coupling pins between carriages to keep them together: e.g. *a, the; by, from, to*);
- c) by **adding** a sound at the **end** of a word (these sounds being written as *-d*, *-n* or *-s*). (This is like modifying the profile of the end of a carriage so that it locks firmly into the next carriage without the need for a separate coupling: e.g. *boy, boy’s, boys; child, children; give, gives, given; receive, receives, received*);
- d) by **changing** the sound in the **middle** of a word (a bit like painting the outside of each such carriage with the distinctive colour of a livery: e.g. *sing, sang, sung*);
- e) by **changing the word** more radically, as in the sequences: *(ye), you, your, yours*, or *he, him, his, (his ’n)*. (The English pronouns will enable me to explain the roles of the accusative and genitive flexions of *pulai*, *doxê* and *dynamis*).

Then they need to be made aware of some bad news and some good news.

The bad news is that Ancient Greek used methods (c) and (d) a very great deal, and, very often, (f), added sounds at the **beginning** of a word.

The good news is that every speaker of Ancient Greek used to learn all these flexions without any conscious effort (as easily as English kids learning how to use *-d*, *-n* and *-s*) and that they can learn a lot of real Greek without having to memorise any rules before they start.

C. Continuation of learning process down to the end of the play

For the remaining fifty minutes in this session, it will be more of the same.

They will ‘study’ the few remaining lines (being delighted to find how much repetition there is) always in the same way: the tune and the rhythm first; then any new sounds in the syllables; then how to write the new sounds with new letters.

At each stage there will be in-group revision for both listening and writing, under the guidance of the ushers, who will smuggle in some new simple words that use the letters they have learned up to that point, but in different combinations.

Again see notes above about the need to prepare such supplementary material. We did very little of this on 11 June 2012. But the kids experimented with writing their own names or other English words, and, in general, loved fooling about with the alphabet.

D. Mention of the missing four letters of the alphabet

Towards the end of this session, I taught them two new words, which are identical in Ancient and Modern Greek, *Ho psalmos tou zôgraphos* (meaning, ‘The Painter’s Song’), to introduce the only four letters they will not have met in the poem.

E. Summary of morning’s work and recitation of whole text

At the end of the morning session, they will be given summary sheets, showing the whole text printed out, and the whole alphabet in order for reference.

We failed to give them the alphabet and did not take enough trouble with the whole text. This should be in Christos’ monotonic version, in large type, and be set out with the rubrics contained in the Document headed *Text and stage directions*.

There might be time to mention some English words which contain the roots they have been writing in the Greek alphabet (but a lot of these words are hardly in common use, so there is no need to labour the point: archbishop, monarch, aeon, pylon, basilica, Basil, Cyril, doxology, polemical, democrat, autocrat, dynamite). On 11 June 2012 I did mention Basil and Cyril to the children while they were experimenting with the letters.

And before breaking for lunch, we’ll practise recitation of the whole poem, within the three groups, so that they get used to saying the words in unison without a conductor (as naturally as a group of kids in a playground will call out, all together, as though by instinct, “What’s the time, Mister Wolf?”).

Ideally, they will know the whole poem by heart, without any conscious effort, at the end of the second morning session.

Needless to say, this was an ‘idealised’ vision. In the event they read from printed texts (exactly as we do in Emma) and would never have managed to remember the lines up there in front of the audience. But the fact that they read, instead of speaking, did have an adverse effect on the intonation patterns, on the ‘speech tunes’ with which we began.

The Third Session of 90 minutes

A. The tunes, sounds and timbre of the whole piece to be practised with Christos until most of the class seem ‘word perfect’.

After lunch we will resume with revision, particularly of the ‘tune’, i.e. they will imitate Christos reciting each phrase, and line, and the whole poem, so that they sound as ‘Greek as possible’.

B. Rehearsal: (a) Arrangement of props

We’ll then decide how to arrange chairs and props in the room (a Music Room) in which we’ll perform.

We have to site a data projector and screen, a keyboard and synthesiser, two large tables (representing the city walls) with a gap between them (representing the ‘portals’/‘gates’), and, behind one of the tables, a bench on which four kids can stand, as the *archontes* of line 1.

On 11 June 2012 this part was very enjoyable to all concerned and we got a very pleasing lay-out

C. Rehearsal: (b) Blocking the movements within each performance and between the second and third performances

(There will be three performances of the same play, each lasting about a minute and a half.)

Then we’ll ‘block’ the very simple movements of the three groups of four kids.

In each case they will be joined by their usher, as unobtrusively as possible, who will steer them, if necessary, to the right positions and, if necessary, make sure they come in on cue.

On 11 June 2012, the ushers knelt beside the kids. It worked very well.

The first and second tables provided the relief force, speaking antiphonally, as A and B, while the third table provided the guards on the walls above the gate, C.

Ideally, each group would have got to play A, B and C in turn in the three successive performances; but it worked very well on 11 June 2012 for the audience even though the kids did not change roles, thanks to the different music and images used in each performance.

D. Rehearsal: (c) Music rehearsal

Then we’ll see take the final decisions as to how to fit in the music.

In each performance there will be a very simple prelude of 15 seconds, repeated between the two halves, and a fanfare of 15-20 seconds to announce the coming of the King of Glory at the end.
Slightly varied music each time. We used Handel, God Save the Queen and Beethoven's Fifth. Brilliantly successful.

E. Dress rehearsals

Then we'll practice, moving, reciting and gesturing And we'll be synchronising the projection of the surtitles and accompanying images.

F. Performances

Then we'll let the proud parents in and 'let battle commence'.

A brief introduction and setting of the scene (with images) from me.

First performance.

Linking remarks, ad libbed by me, while the groups change position.

Second performance.

More linking remarks etc.

Third performance.

I am minded to round off the final performance by asking Christos to take the part of the King of Glory (they'll see why the gates have to be lifted) and to enter the city to the accompaniment the last movement of Beethoven's Fifth.

We did just this on 11 June 2012 and it was a lovely piece of theatre and a suitable climax and applause-jerker.

Q E D