

Classical Studies in Cyprus Education: Teaching Methodologies and Educational Directions

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The Paris Conference on Education 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The teaching of Ancient Greek played historically a pivotal role in fostering a Greek identity in Cyprus and legitimizing the aspiration for the union of the island with the Greek state. To this end, it was modelled on that of Greece's secondary education. Despite independent statehood and the need to decouple Cypriot education policy from Greek curricula, notably after 1974, Cyprus have maintained its close connection with Greece regarding the teaching of the Ancient Greek language. We argue first that the diachronic adoption of teaching methods and textbooks from Greece has steered Cyprus towards a teacher-centered approach to Ancient Greek. We then argue that this is an unsuitable instructional approach in our times marked by an increasingly pressing need to cultivate students' higher-order thinking skills. The development of such skills is advocated not just by contemporary pedagogical practices or the European Union and international organizations. It is also recognised in the new national curricula of the two countries themselves. Finally, we argue that the teaching of Ancient Greek offers fertile ground for the cultivation of analytical, interpretative, synthetic, and evaluative skills and we conclude by proposing teaching strategies that enhance students' critical and creative thinking.

Keywords: Ancient Greek language teaching, Cyprus education, educational policy, higher-order thinking skills

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Introduction

The teaching of Ancient Greek in Cypriot secondary education was shaped by the island's particular historical circumstances, institutional structures, and ideological orientations, all of which influenced the formation of its educational policy. The civic-ethnic model of education adopted in Cyprus was grounded in the Greek curriculum of Humanities and Letters, placing particular emphasis on language, history, religion, and Ancient Greek (Koutselini, 1997). From the late nineteenth century onwards, the subject functioned not merely as a linguistic or philological discipline, but also as a key mechanism for the cultivation of Greek national consciousness among Greek Cypriots. Within this context, Cypriot educational policy developed in close alignment with the evolution of the Greek educational system, particularly with regard to curricula, textbooks, and teaching methodologies.

This close relationship proved especially significant in the field of Classical Studies. Ancient Greek was perceived as a means of safeguarding cultural continuity between antiquity and modern Hellenism, while its teaching reproduced, to a considerable extent, the pedagogical traditions prevailing in Greek secondary education. Consequently, the historical development of the subject in Cyprus cannot be understood independently of the broader political, ideological, and educational developments that characterised the Greek educational sphere.

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the historical trajectory of Ancient Greek teaching in Cyprus from the period of British colonial rule to contemporary educational reforms. Drawing on the theoretical framework of path dependency, the study examines how the long-term adoption of Greek curricula, textbooks, and pedagogical practices contributed to the formation of a powerful educational tradition that persisted despite the significant political, social, and educational transformations experienced by Cyprus throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In addition, the study analyses the reform initiatives of recent decades and the new educational priorities that have highlighted the need to reconsider the role of the subject. Finally, it argues that the teaching of Ancient Greek can move beyond its traditional grammar-translation orientation and function as a field for the development of students' critical and creative thinking, proposing indicative teaching strategies that respond to the demands of contemporary education.

Methodology

This study adopts a historical and qualitative approach. Drawing on educational policy documents, curriculum reports, official reform proposals, and relevant literature on the teaching of Ancient Greek in Cyprus, it examines the historical development of the subject from the colonial period to contemporary educational reforms. The analysis is informed by the theoretical framework of path dependency, which is used to interpret the persistence of educational structures, curricula, and pedagogical practices over time.

Particular attention is given to the ways in which educational policies, institutional arrangements, and ideological priorities shaped both the aims and the pedagogical orientation of Ancient Greek teaching. Through the examination of official reports, curriculum documents, and scholarly studies, the article traces the continuities and transformations that characterised the subject across different historical periods. Rather than focusing on isolated educational reforms, the analysis seeks to identify the broader historical processes that influenced the evolution of the subject and contributed to the formation of enduring educational traditions.

The study combines historical interpretation with contemporary educational analysis. While the first part explores the historical foundations of Ancient Greek teaching and the mechanisms that contributed to the reproduction of established practices, the second part examines recent reform initiatives and emerging educational priorities. In doing so, it investigates how contemporary developments in curriculum theory and Classical Studies pedagogy have created new possibilities for rethinking the role of Ancient Greek in secondary education, particularly with regard to the cultivation of students' critical and creative thinking skills.

The Historical Foundations of Ancient Greek Teaching in Cyprus

The institutionalisation of Greek education in Cyprus during the period of British colonial rule was closely associated with the national aspirations of the Greek-Cypriot community. Education was regarded as the principal means of preserving and strengthening Greek national identity, while Ancient Greek occupied a privileged position within the curriculum because of its symbolic role as a link to the classical past.

The educational model adopted in Greek-Cypriot schools was largely based on its Greek counterpart. Curricula, textbooks, examination systems, and pedagogical principles were transferred from Greece to Cyprus, creating a high degree of educational convergence between the two countries. Consequently, the teaching of Ancient Greek was shaped according to the methodological principles that already prevailed in Greek education, with particular emphasis on grammatical analysis, syntactical processing, and translation. These practices reflected the dominant educational assumptions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, according to which the teaching of classical languages primarily aimed at cultivating intellectual discipline and linguistic precision. As a result, the interpretation of texts remained largely subordinate to their linguistic analysis (Persianis, 2006).

Path Dependency and Long-Term Educational Continuity

The persistence of specific teaching traditions can be interpreted through the theoretical framework of path dependency. According to this perspective, decisions made within a particular historical context generate institutional trajectories that tend to reproduce themselves and persist even after the original conditions that gave rise to them have changed (Mahoney, 2000; Pierson, 2000).

In the case of Cyprus, the adoption of the Greek educational model during the colonial period created a long-lasting form of institutional dependence. The use of Greek textbooks, the preparation of teachers according to Greek educational standards, and the maintenance of similar examination procedures reinforced the continuity of educational practices. The establishment of the Republic of Cyprus in 1960 did not lead to substantial changes in the teaching of Ancient Greek. Although political independence created the conditions for the development of an autonomous educational policy, the existing structures remained largely unchanged. Even after the events of 1974, when the need for an educational policy more closely aligned with the particular characteristics of Cypriot society became increasingly evident, the fundamental assumptions underpinning the teaching of the subject were largely preserved.

This continuity constitutes a characteristic example of path-dependent development. Established curricula, textbooks, examination requirements, and prevailing conceptions regarding the teaching of Ancient Greek functioned as mechanisms of institutional inertia,

limiting the possibilities for radical transformation and contributing to the long-term reproduction of traditional educational practice.

The Dominance of the Traditional Teaching Approach

Throughout the twentieth century, and well into the early decades of the twenty-first century, the teaching of Ancient Greek in Cyprus was characterised by the predominance of the grammar–translation method. Classroom instruction focused primarily on linguistic decoding, morphological and syntactical analysis, and the accurate translation of texts into Modern Greek. Within this framework, students were expected mainly to reproduce linguistic knowledge and predetermined interpretations. Teaching was organised around the teacher’s presentation of content, reflecting a predominantly teacher-centred approach, while assessment rewarded accuracy and memorisation. Consequently, ancient authors were often approached more as sources of linguistic phenomena than as carriers of historical, political, or philosophical ideas (Markoglou, 2022).

This methodological tradition was further reinforced by the examination-oriented nature of the educational system. Success in examinations depended, and to a considerable extent still depends, on students’ mastery of translation, grammar, and syntax. As a result, teachers frequently prioritised content coverage and linguistic accuracy at the expense of inquiry-based and interpretative approaches.

The close alignment of Cypriot education with Greek curricula and textbooks inevitably influenced the teaching of Ancient Greek. However, educational policies and pedagogical choices developed within a different social and educational context were not always adapted to the specific needs of the Cypriot school system. At the same time, from the final decades of the twentieth century onwards, both Greek and international scholarship increasingly questioned the effectiveness of dominant approaches to Classical Languages teaching. Criticism focused on the excessive emphasis placed on grammatical processing and the reproduction of predetermined interpretations, practices that often limited students’ opportunities to engage with ancient texts as sources of cultural meaning and historical inquiry (Kakridis, 2010; Tsafos, 2004; Varmazis, 2008; Zekas, 2018).

Within this context, contemporary developments in Classical Languages pedagogy began to place greater emphasis on connecting linguistic instruction with the historical and cultural context of texts, as well as on promoting students’ active participation in the interpretative process (Markoglou, 2026). These developments gradually highlighted the need to reconsider the teaching of Ancient Greek in Cyprus, not in terms of its place within the curriculum, but rather in terms of its educational aims and pedagogical practices. As Cypriot education became increasingly oriented towards European educational priorities from the 1990s onwards, the modernisation of Ancient Greek teaching became closely linked to broader discussions concerning curriculum renewal and the transformation of school knowledge.

Despite international and European developments promoting more student-centred approaches and the cultivation of higher-order thinking skills (European Commission, 2018; OECD, 2019), the teaching of Ancient Greek in Cypriot secondary education has continued to be characterised, to a considerable extent, by teacher-centred practices and a strong emphasis on linguistic analysis (Markoglou, 2022, 2026). The persistence of this educational tradition can be attributed to several interrelated factors.

First, it reflects the long-standing attachment to the Attic model of instruction and the grammar–translation tradition that dominated both Greek and Cypriot education for much of the twentieth century (Kakridis, 1994; Kazazis, 2001; Koutselini & Agathangelou, 2010; Makris, 2000). Second, a number of studies have highlighted the insufficient pedagogical and didactic preparation of both pre-service and in-service teachers regarding contemporary approaches to the teaching of Classical Languages (Bista et al., 2016; Frydaki, 2015; Kassotakis, 2010; Kazamias et al., 1996). Third, many educators continue to believe that a strong focus on grammar, syntax, and translation prepares students more effectively for high-stakes examinations (Tsiortas, 2008; Varmazis, 2008).

The prevalence of these assumptions contributed to the maintenance of a relatively stable teaching culture, even during periods in which educational policy attempted to introduce new pedagogical orientations. As a result, the transition towards more inquiry-based, interpretative, and student-centred forms of teaching occurred at a relatively slow pace. This helps explain why the demand for a substantial renewal of Ancient Greek teaching has re-emerged with particular intensity during the educational reforms of recent decades.

Contemporary Educational Reforms and New Priorities

During recent decades, international developments in education have increasingly highlighted the need to cultivate higher-order skills, including critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, and collaboration (European Commission, 2018; OECD, 2019). This shift reflects broader social and economic transformations associated with globalisation, the knowledge society, and the growing need to prepare students for complex and rapidly changing environments. Consequently, educational policy across many European countries gradually moved away from an exclusive emphasis on the accumulation of knowledge and towards the development of competencies that enable students to analyse information, evaluate evidence, construct arguments, and formulate well-reasoned judgments.

These developments also influenced Cyprus, where, from the early 2000s onwards, an increasingly intense debate emerged concerning the orientation and effectiveness of the educational system. A major turning point was the establishment of the Educational Reform Committee in 2003, which was tasked with examining the Cypriot educational system as a whole and proposing directions for its modernisation. For the first time since independence, educational policy sought to be grounded in a systematic analysis of the social, cultural, and economic conditions of the Republic of Cyprus rather than relying exclusively on the transfer of educational models from Greece.

The Educational Reform Committee's report (2004) linked educational modernisation to a broader reconsideration of the aims of schooling, emphasising the development of democratic attitudes, critical thinking, creativity, and students' active participation in the learning process. These ideas influenced subsequent reform initiatives and were reflected in the new curricula, which placed greater emphasis on student-centred learning, inquiry-based forms of instruction, and the development of key competencies and skills (Persianis, 2006, pp. 199–200).

These developments inevitably influenced discussions concerning the role and orientation of Ancient Greek within the Cypriot school system. Whereas in previous decades the subject had been valued primarily for its contribution to the preservation of Greek cultural continuity and national identity, it gradually came to be viewed as a discipline capable of contributing to the development of cognitive, metacognitive, and interpretative skills. This shift was reinforced by

contemporary trends in Classical Languages pedagogy, which advocated a closer integration of linguistic instruction with the historical and cultural contexts of texts, as well as a more active role for students in the interpretative process.

Despite these emerging priorities, the trajectory of the subject was not characterised by a radical departure from established teaching practices. Rather, reform initiatives coexisted with strong historical continuities that continued to connect the subject to the traditional approaches prevailing in Greece. A characteristic example is the recommendation of the Committee for the Reform of the Curriculum (MoEC, 2015, pp. 3, 22) to strengthen the position of Ancient Greek and Classical Studies. This recommendation was based both on the cultural and historical significance of the subject and on its potential contribution to the broader intellectual development of students. Nevertheless, as was also the case in Greece, modernisation efforts encountered deeply rooted institutional and pedagogical traditions that had been established during earlier periods.

This tension between reform-oriented discourse and educational continuity became one of the defining characteristics of the contemporary period and shaped the framework within which new proposals for the teaching of Ancient Greek emerged. Within this context, the central debate gradually shifted from the question of whether the subject should be preserved to the question of how it should be taught and how it could contribute to the development of students' critical and creative thinking skills.

Repositioning the Role of Ancient Greek

Contemporary approaches to Classical Studies challenge the traditional perception of Ancient Greek as exclusively a language-based subject. Instead, they highlight its potential contribution to the development of higher-order cognitive skills and to students' active engagement with the meanings embedded in ancient texts. Within this framework, the focus shifts from mechanical linguistic processing towards interpretation, historical understanding, dialogue, and the critical examination of sources.

This shift is associated with a broader reconsideration of the aims of Ancient Greek teaching. Ancient texts are no longer approached solely as objects of translation and grammatical analysis, but also as historical, cultural, and ideological documents that can serve as starting points for inquiry, reflection, and the construction of meaning. Although translation remains an important component of instruction, it is no longer treated as an end in itself; rather, it is integrated into a wider process of understanding, interpretation, and evaluation.

At the same time, connecting ancient texts with their historical and cultural contexts, together with the use of diverse extratextual sources, expands the educational potential of the subject and strengthens the links between past and present. From this perspective, Classical Studies can contribute not only to students' linguistic and cultural formation, but also to the development of competencies considered essential for contemporary education and democratic participation.

In light of these developments, there is an increasing need to adopt teaching approaches that move beyond the grammar–translation tradition and make full use of the educational potential of ancient texts for the cultivation of critical and creative thinking. The following section presents a number of indicative teaching strategies that illustrate how these contemporary

pedagogical orientations can be implemented in the teaching of Ancient Greek in secondary education.

Cultivating Higher-Order Thinking Skills in Ancient Greek

Building on the historical and theoretical framework outlined above, this article proposes a series of teaching strategies inspired by the principles of critical pedagogy, aiming to cultivate students' higher-order thinking skills through the teaching of Ancient Greek. More specifically, it encourages educators to adopt practices that foster critical and creative thinking within the context of Cypriot secondary education. Critical pedagogy was selected as a guiding framework because it seeks to create conditions that support students' intellectual, cultural, and personal development. In this perspective, learning is not limited to the transmission of predetermined knowledge; rather, it actively engages learners in constructing meanings, interpretations, judgments, and generalisations (Bertrand, 2003). Such an approach contributes to the development of higher-order cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-emotional competencies (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Krathwohl et al., 1964).

The shift of contemporary curricula towards the development of higher-order thinking skills has created new possibilities for the teaching of Ancient Greek. In particular, critical thinking can be cultivated through activities that encourage students to interpret, analyse, evaluate, and synthesise information, moving beyond the mechanical processing of linguistic forms. The comparative examination of historical and literary sources, the exploration of multiple perspectives, the evaluation of arguments, and the justification of personal positions transform ancient texts into spaces of dialogue, inquiry, and reflection. Likewise, teaching techniques such as debates, the evaluation of historical claims, the analysis of ideological dimensions of texts, and the formulation of alternative interpretations contribute to the development of analysis, evaluation, argumentation, and reflective judgment. From this perspective, Ancient Greek should not be viewed merely as a subject of linguistic training, but as a privileged educational field for cultivating critical thinking and active citizenship, in line with contemporary conceptions of classical education and democratic literacy (European Commission, 2018; Facione, 2009; Markoglou, 2026).

Beyond critical thinking, Ancient Greek also offers significant opportunities for the cultivation of creative thinking. Ancient texts can serve as starting points for the generation of new ideas, alternative interpretations, and original narratives. Techniques such as SCAMPER, hypothetical scenarios ("What would happen if...?"), perspective shifts, narrative reconstruction, creative writing, dramatization, and digital storytelling encourage students to move beyond conventional readings and engage with the ancient world through imagination and originality. Through activities such as designing alternative endings, reconstructing dialogues, creating new narratives based on ancient characters, or transferring events to different historical and social contexts, learners are encouraged to generate ideas, combine diverse elements, and develop divergent thinking. In this way, the teaching of Ancient Greek can evolve from a process of knowledge reproduction into a process of creative meaning-making, enabling students to construct personal and collective interpretations of the ancient world while fostering innovation, imagination, and intellectual autonomy (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2014; Runco & Jaeger, 2012).

Conclusions

The historical trajectory of the teaching of Ancient Greek in Cyprus highlights the decisive role played by broader political, social and ideological conditions in shaping the subject. From the period of British rule up to the first decades of the twenty-first century, Ancient Greek was closely associated with the formation of Greek national identity and the preservation of the cultural continuity of Hellenism. The long-term adoption of Greek curricula, school textbooks and teaching practices created a strong educational tradition, which was maintained even after the independence of the Republic of Cyprus and the significant socio-political changes that followed. This development confirms that educational policies and teaching practices are not shaped exclusively by contemporary reform initiatives, but are substantially influenced by previous choices and institutional trajectories that tend to reproduce themselves over time.

The analysis also showed that the dominance of the grammar-translation tradition and teacher-centred forms of instruction constituted one of the most stable characteristics of the subject in Cypriot secondary education. Despite the modernisation efforts that emerged from the 1990s onwards, as well as the increasing influence of European educational policies, changes in the field of Ancient Greek often remained limited and fragmented. Nevertheless, contemporary reform directions gradually highlighted the need to redefine the role of the subject, not in terms of its place within the curriculum, but in terms of its aims and the pedagogical practices that frame it. Within this context, the teaching of Ancient Greek began to be linked with broader concerns regarding the development of higher-order thinking skills, learner-centred learning and the formation of active and reflective citizens.

In light of the above findings, the present study argues that the future of Ancient Greek in Cypriot education is connected not only with the preservation or strengthening of its place within the curriculum, but also with the way in which it is taught. The use of interpretative, inquiry-based and creative forms of instruction can transform the ancient text from an object of linguistic decoding into a stimulus for critical reflection, creative expression and historical understanding. Through appropriate activities, Ancient Greek can contribute substantially to the development of students' critical and creative thinking. In this way, the subject will preserve its enduring cultural and educational value while simultaneously responding to the demands of contemporary education and the knowledge society, demonstrating that classical education can remain relevant and pedagogically productive in the twenty-first century.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors declare that ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used solely to assist with language editing and proofreading of the manuscript. Its use was limited to improving grammar, spelling, sentence structure, clarity, and overall readability of the text. No AI-generated content, ideas, interpretations, analyses, or research findings were incorporated into the manuscript. The study conception, research design, methodology, data collection, analyses, interpretation of findings, and conclusions are entirely the original work of the authors and were developed through the independent and systematic conduct of the research.

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