

Material Culture in the Intermediate Greek Classroom

Even the most motivated students in introductory Greek often find the transition to the intermediate level difficult. While they may already be achieving their goal of reading ancient literature in the original language, it is often slow going and the fun of Lucian or Aesop may be blunted by struggles with grammar and frustration arising from differential abilities within the class. This paper will discuss the use of material culture to increase student engagement in intermediate language lessons. The central case study will be a class project in which students produced sheets of papyrus paper using traditional methods and wrote on them. Since the specific materials necessary for this project may not be readily available to all teachers, a number of alternative projects will be discussed as well.

Most students are naturally curious about everyday objects from the past, and this curiosity serves as an effective motivator. Even if the instructor wants to stay focused on language, plenty of objects carry text and therefore provide opportunities to discuss the use and production of the objects themselves. The ensuing culture lessons offer a break from the daily grind of grammar and translation, provide crucial context to the literature at the core of the curriculum, and inspire the students' imaginations as they attempt to reconstruct the past. A good example is papyrus. On my campus, the facilities staff ornamentally cultivates a closely related varietal of nutsedge and in 2019 they agreed to set the plants aside for my instructional use at the end of the growing season. Students collaborated with me in preparing and processing the reeds. Using part or all of one class period per week over the course of a month we made two attempts to create usable pages. After the first attempt failed (a learning experience in itself), we ultimately produced a viable writing surface. We then wrote on it as a group using reed pens and

ink procured cheaply at a local art store. The experience was a fun way to build camaraderie among the students, a crucial factor to the success of a language course. Perhaps even more importantly, each step in the process entailed valuable historical lessons. Students learned a great deal about the labor practices, trade networks, and ecology of the ancient world as we navigated the arduous process of making papyrus paper. When we returned to reading literary texts full time, students remained thoroughly engaged and their questions increasingly pursued cultural, historical, and technological issues as well as grammar. By the end of the term they were reading literature as literature rather than as a series of grammar and translation exercises. The same result could easily be achieved through any similar project.

Material objects can help language learners make meaningful connections across cultural barriers in any multilingual context (Komorowska 2018). In the ancient Greek classroom, this phenomenon translates into a greater understanding of the distant world in which literary texts were produced and that is, after all, the point of learning the language in the first place.

Bibliography

Komorowska, H. 2018. "The World of Things: Material Culture in Language Teaching and Teacher Education" in *The Material Culture of Multilingualism*, edited by L. Aronin, M. Hornsby, and G. Kiliańska-Przybyło. Springer Publishing: 45-68.