The Challenge and the Joy of Teaching Heritage Learners

by Elsa Amanatidou
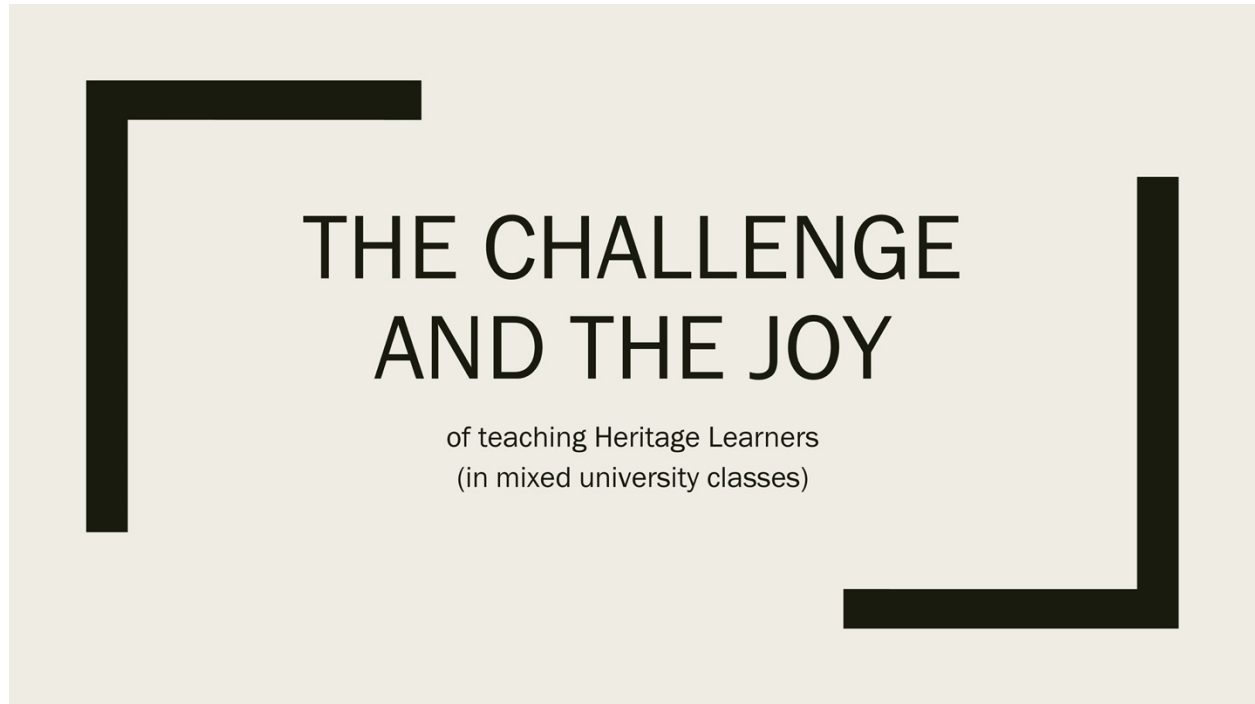
In most U.S higher education institutions where programs of Modern Greek Studies or Greek language courses are offered, Heritage Language Learners (HLLs) are taught in the same class as second language and culture learners (SLLs). This practice has major implications for course design, instructional approaches, the pace of acquisition and assessment strategies. In a mixed class of HLLs and SLLs, the development of interculturality and critical literacies—some of the overarching goals of a proficiency and literacy-oriented foreign language curriculum—happens within a framework of constant construction and negotiation of identities and, often, a positioning and repositioning of the learner as an insider or outsider in relation to the content studied. The challenge, and joy, for the instructor of this "mixed class" is to design the language learning environment in a way that takes into account both the heritage learners' language capital and

ideologies and the collective identities of the class and situates them in a dialogic relationship with one another, while at the same time connecting them with the personal and social identity politics that inform so many of today's critical issues.

The presentation will focus on a number of key issues, three to be precise, which seek to identify different ways in which the instructor may explore "the intricate relationship between language, thought and culture" (Kramsch 2009), while also maintaining a focus on language as system and the motivation of all stakeholders. But first, and by way of an introduction, let's take a rather schematic look at the field of heritage language education in the United States.

Research and scholarship on heritage language linguistics, including the theoretical underpinnings of curriculum design for HLLS and the distinct instructional approaches and classroom practices that have been developed in response to their particular profiles, is abundant, largely thanks to the increasing number of Spanish speakers in the United States who identify as HLLS (Goulette 2020).

HLLS, however, are by no means a homogeneous group as they bring to the classroom a diverse range of background knowledge, perceptions of their heritage cultures, instructional needs and linguistic variation. I hope that the accompanying article by Kagan and Polinsky has somewhat situated you in the ongoing debate
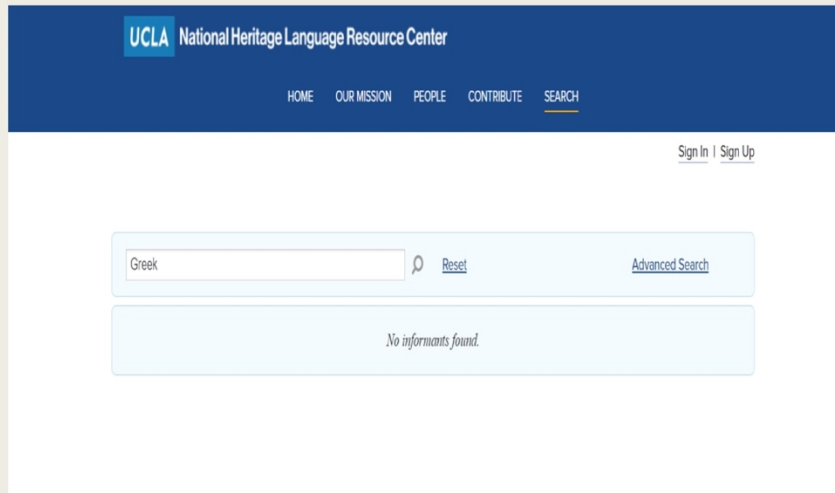
regarding terminology, the various definitions that are floating about with regard to the "broad" and "narrow" types of HLLs, the characteristics of their linguistic systems, their varied relationship to the "baseline" and the factors that contribute to the maintenance or attrition of their language.

What the literature review also reveals, however, is that, beyond experimental research, data regarding the distinct status of Greek Heritage Language Education and Heritage language programs in universities in the United States is scarce. This scarcity includes quantitative data about program building, funding, demographics and class size and qualitative data regarding background, attitudes and motivation for learning the HL.

Resources

- **UCLA National Language Resource Center**
- **National Heritage Language Survey**
- **Heritage Language Data Repository**
- **The National Heritage Language Program Database**

Without a doubt, the [UCLA National Language Resource Center](#) is a valuable research base for curriculum design, teaching and learning, as it houses a wealth of materials and data, from podcasts and model course syllabi for HLLs to the White Paper on Heritage Languages and the results of the National Heritage Language Survey and the Heritage Language Data Repository. But when I searched the site hoping to find some data on Greek, I might as well have been waiting for Godot (4&5).

UCLA National Heritage Language Resource Center

HOME   OUR MISSION   PEOPLE   CONTRIBUTE   SEARCH

Sign In | Sign Up

Greek   🔍 Reset   Advanced Search

No informants found.

results for **Greek**.

Did you mean:

16
great

9
green

3
greet

Similarly, The National Heritage Language Program Database yielded 19 results, when I searched for Greek profile programs, but only two of them were Higher Education institutions. Disappointingly, one of these two, St Norbert College Language Services seems to offer Greek only as part of their continuing education service for the community, whereas, the other program in Amherst is no longer

active and, in any case, it functioned only as an Independent Study program with funding that no longer exists.

What this failed search may teach us, if anything, is that it is imperative to start populating these sites with data regarding Greek as a HL and put Greek on the map of Heritage Language Education in universities in the United States and in the repository of materials. Considering what the 2007 MLA report called "the nation's language deficit," one should not underestimate the untapped potential of HLLs to accelerate through proficiency and contribute, through their cultural and linguistic knowledge, to the U.S.'s and the world's multilingual future.

There are several colleagues in institutions in the United States and Canada who have extensive experience in this field, both scholarly and practical, so perhaps Εργαστήριον in collaboration with other key stake holders such as the Modern Greek Studies Association (MGSA) could respond to this call to arms and consider organizing a colloquium on the topic of Research and Practice in Greek Heritage Language Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. We are in need of more classroom-based studies in U.S. undergraduate programs to gather information that would allow us to best meet the needs of these diverse student groups and ensure equal and equally stimulating academic opportunities for all of our students.

Let me return to the topic that is the main focus of this presentation today and I will start by sketching out the framework of my research. My experience as instructor of Modern Greek language and culture is embedded in undergraduate and graduate level university programs in the United States, where HLLs and SLLs are taught in the same class. Therefore, it is this experience, coupled with my philological background and my training in Second Language Acquisition, that inform my approach to the articulation of syllabi, instructional design and assessment practices in the mixed classes that have become rather commonplace in the last ten years; increasingly so, I may say, in relation to twenty years ago, but this is my own anecdotal evidence based on personal experience. While thinking through the challenges and the joys that are part and parcel of these mixed language classes, I shall put forward three points substantiated by examples of classroom and assessment practices that aim to facilitate every student's equal and enjoyable access to content and activities that fall under the themes and subthemes of novice and intermediate level Greek classes: identity building and construction of self; coming of age and rites of passage in different sociocultural moments in

Greece and elsewhere. While making these three points, I will also demonstrate the affordances of various tools that have helped me overcome some of the challenges, so that there's more joy and less challenge.

Point 1

My first point concerns the importance of identifying from the outset what Kagan and Dillon describe as "*the cultural and linguistic* domain" of the HLLs, which has to do with prior knowledge and facility in fields such as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and skills competence in reading, writing, speaking and listening.

In order to design a course that can serve both HLLs and SLLs well, it is important to ascertain background knowledge, motivation and goals for learning and proficiency levels across the four skills and the three modes of communication, interpretative, presentational and interpersonal. To this purpose, I use a questionnaire that includes self-reporting and, when needed or in doubt, a placement or a diagnostic test. Once this information is established, and bear in mind that one's proficiency level in, say, listening is not the same as one's competence in speaking or writing, I can better align my instructional design with the level of the class.

For example, the first few weeks of classes at my institution are known as "shopping week" with students dropping in and out of classes, until they settle on the ones that better serve their academic trajectories, which at this day and age are often informed either by the study of money or the study of subjects that will secure them a lot of money. In light of current, prevalent perceptions of academic trajectories serving as facilitators of career success, I am sure you can all imagine the challenge of small humanities programs and the significance of enrollments for their survival.

Here's the challenge that I have encountered in Novice classes where HLLs with some functional listening ability, when it comes to basic vocabulary and generally good pronunciation, are side by side with SLLs who are starting from scratch, and whose prior experience in language learning may often include either a romance language or ancient Greek. HLLs have what Valdes (2001) described as "developed functional proficiencies," which usually means that, even when they do not possess literacy, their speaking and listening competence is at a level that a true SLL would require hundreds of hours to reach.

This is a potential that instructors need to build on and encourage, without demotivating the diverse body of students or losing sight of the stated course objectives. A HLL who walks into a classroom of true L2 learners, usually possesses good pronunciation and intonation, unless of course their prior exposure to the language was minimal and they were never Heritage speakers, before they became HLLs as adults. Here lies the challenge: how to engage students in activities that serve all of them, without making the HLLS die of boredom or demotivate the SLLs, as they are trying to get to grips with the fact that six letters and letter combinations in Greek all produce the sound [e] or that digraphs such as αυ and ευ are pronounced differently depending on whether the letter that follows is voiced or not.

To this end, I have designed a set of orientation activities that live on the active learning platform Top Hat and introduce phonology and the writing system, complete with audio and video. These are assigned to students prior to the beginning of the course and allow the SLLs to work at their own pace outside of class, without feeling demotivated by the performance of HLLs. During this orientation period the introduction of "new" vocabulary takes place with mostly cognates and allows students to work on the same aspect, but on different tasks,

building on their own different strengths. Through this orientation activity, HLLs employ their cognitive operations to discover new knowledge in becoming familiar with the spelling and etymology of non-basic vocabulary that is not necessarily part of their Greek speaking repertoire at home. At the same time, SLLs, whose new knowledge targets a different aspect, the Greek phonemic system and phonological awareness, experience a rewarding validation in the form of "look at all the Greek we know already," as they make connections between the L2 they are studying and their own areas of disciplinary interests. The concerted effort to link language learning with the development of 21st century skills- a thread that runs through the three-year curricular sequence- establishes the relevance of Greek for everyone's education and enhances existing motivations for learning that may stem from socio-cultural factors.

Point 2

2: Macro-based teaching, building on literacy and cultural capital, while noticing linguistic structures in context
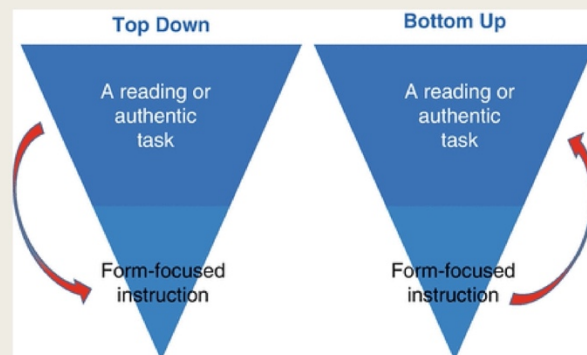
My second point builds on the first one which was all about knowing your students and employing differentiated instruction strategies. I propose that the educational paradigm that will best serve the needs of all students must also be informed by the principles of "macro-based" teaching. The good news about this strategy is that it aligns well with the communicative language approach of the literacy and proficiency-oriented curriculum. Macro-based teaching can prove particularly

useful for mixed classes at university level, as it is content and discourse-based and introduces linguistic structures through the multi-modality of text, in other words, first content and then the linguistic building blocks.

This does not mean that the instructional approach neglects form-focused instruction. On the contrary, the students are trained to notice form in meaningful context, which is age-appropriate, appropriately and academically challenging and makes sense to all stakeholders. Micro-approaches which isolate language elements based on their complexity and build learners' competency from the bottom-up tend to emphasize metalinguistic rules (Kagan and Dillon 2008).

Such rules, however, and the discrete grammatical activities that accompany them, appear to do little to help the language acquisition of HLLs, because, unlike foreign language learners, HLLs are not always exposed to language through metalanguage. Grammatical explanations may be incomprehensible when they are not grounded in meaningful context and it has been often the case that a HLL who performs poorly in such discrete exercises, is perfectly capable of producing accurate and communicatively efficient utterances in real time, in context.

In the traditional fill-in-the-gap exercise presented below, HLLs tend to not perform as well as SLLs, who are often trained to approach a language through its linguistic building blocks, i.e., with a form-focused approach first.

Δ. Αόριστος και Παρατατικός = Simple Past and Imperfect

1. Όταν είχαν λεφτά, **πάντα** _ταξίδεψω_ ....πρώτη θέση! (ταξιδεύω)
2. Πού ...._πήγες_........................ χτές, Τασούλα; (πηγαίνω)
3. Τι ώρα ...._φεύγε_........................το λεωφορείο, το Σάββατο; (φεύγω)
4. Όταν <u>ήμασταν παιδιά,</u> ......_προτιμάμε_........................διακοπές στη θάλασσα. (προτιμώ)
5. Τι ....._έφαγες_.....................για πρωινό σήμερα; (τρώω)
6. Πού ..._περνά_.................. την Κυριακή το απόγευμα. Γιώργο; (περνάω/περνώ)

A particularly useful tool in this macro-based approach which aims to familiarize students with text of some complexity in ideas and structures and, rather than infantilize them with "novice" content, has some appeal to their intellectual level comes in the form of Digital Social Reading (DSR).

Collaborative Reading Environment
Crowd-sourcing of meaning

DSR, which targets cognitive operations that stimulate intellectual exchange, support peer assessment and result in the creation of a knowledge base, works on the principle of crowdsourcing of meaning, thus democratizing access for all. For me, it has solved the challenge of designing a language learning environment that builds on the heritage learners' cultural capital, while increasing opportunity for literacy and the development of language awareness by participating in a community where other cultural identities and perspectives, and different types of learner strengths come into play. As a tool, DSR is a valuable medium for pursuing Krashen's input hypothesis, which asserts that language acquisition occurs when a learner receives linguistic input that is just beyond their current interlanguage, or level of grammatical competence. So far, DSR has proved to enhance my students' motivation to access content above their language ability, as they embark on creating a community that connects to reading material collaboratively and beyond the realm of what is familiar to them.

There are many digital social reading platforms such as Emargin, Ecomma and Perusall out there, but I have settled on Hypothes.is because it is easily integrated into the learning management system of my institution, which is Canvas, it has a cleaner look, and can work with scanned PDFs and well as websites. In mixed classes of HLLs and SLLs, DSR has proven to be a great platform for collaboration and intercultural exchange. In reading and commenting together, the schemata and cultural capital that HLLs bring to the classroom converse and grapple with the critical gaze of the SLLs, as they discover new cultural content, practices and perspectives, from art and architecture to ways of celebrating and commemorating to attitudes to the negotiation of personal space.

Point 3

My third point follows on the heels of the previous one and concerns the creation of formative and summative assessments that do justice to the linguistic, cognitive and socio-affective domains of all learners. We have touched upon the first two domains, so, by way of a conclusion, I will finish with a few thoughts on the socio-affective domain, especially as it is generally accepted that positive attitudes towards the L2 and C2 (the second language and cultures) and the ethnic groups associated with them facilitate language acquisition (Tse 2000).

At the same time however, experiential research has shown that the sense of cultural and, often, national pride that emerges in a mixed class of HLLs and SLLs can prove rather demotivating for the SLLs, as they are outsiders to the culture, may have very little personal connection to it or not identify with many aspects of it, opting, instead, to remain performers of the L2 and C2 from a critical distance. But what SLLS do have in today's global language classroom, by virtue of enrolling in it, is the motivation to become intercultural, develop critical literacy while also suspending judgment and go effortlessly and respectfully in and out of the various cultural contexts they encounter, including Greek.

This challenge, negotiating the expression and performance of the various identities in the classroom, may be overcome through instructional practices that build on intercultural elements and employ a 'third culture pedagogy' that promotes connections between languages and cultures and different types of discourse and encourages the questioning of dominant attitudes, among others (Kramsch 2009). One such instructional practice is teaching and learning with the news, comprehending, through speech or written text, and analyzing, not only what happens in Greek societies, but also how Greek media report on news that take place in the societies of the L2 students and how the media discourse is constructed to convey meaning or suggest subtext.

Everyone has a story to tell
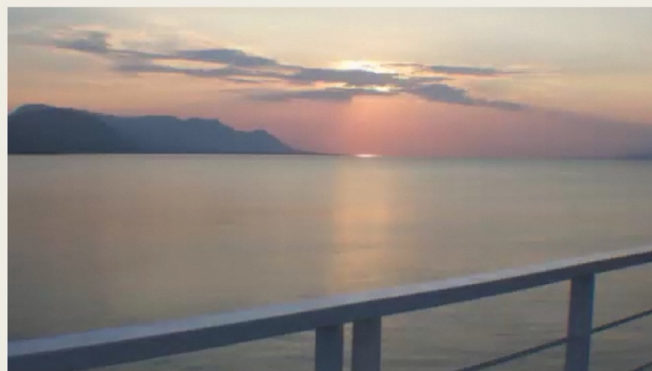
Another practice that has its origins outside the classroom and has proven to be a valuable and effective instructional practice that serves the goals of third culture pedagogy is Digital Story Telling (DST). The inspiration for using digital stories has its origins in the 1990s, when a group of artists and activists in the San Francisco Bay area came together to explore the potential of enhancing story telling through emerging new media. [DST](#) grew out of the work of Joe Lambert and Dana Archley and was considered a form of social activism in the way it was dedicated to assisting "ordinary" people in telling stories that were meaningful to them. The premise on which DST was founded was that "everyone has a story to tell." In a manner very similar to the way that this social practice unfolds outside academia manifesting itself as a civil right, DST in the classroom allows students to integrate their identities with language and technology (which for many nowadays is a constitutive aspect of their identity, in any case), while also promoting synthesis, research, cross-cultural respect and community building.

I first employed DST as an end-of-semester project in 2008 and, since then, it has consistently proven to be a rewarding activity for strengthening community, engaging the students' socio-affective domain and creating opportunities for them to exercise agency in creating class content. There are various reasons why DST has met with considerable success as an instructional tool. First, it is linked to intrinsic motivation: students want to tell their story. It is student-centered: students choose the content of their narrative, control its format, make decisions about what to include and what to exclude, including plot development, selection of the context and setting, sound effects, and performance styles.

DST encourages individuality: it provides a platform for students to express themselves, not only in their words, but also with their voices, with their soundtrack, with objects such as photographs and letters that mean something to them, with content that they feel a particular kinship to; it is not unusual for a digital story to have a strong emotional/dramatic content.

DST is built on collaboration, as it is a group activity, which is project based. Students work on peer-review scripts, collaborate on producing them, constantly relying on one another and freely offering one another their critique, different skills and intelligences.

DST promotes media literacy: the story telling projects facilitate the effective integration of technology into instruction, creating a space where the personal and public meet, in the classroom extension of what students do in their own lives-where they create and readily make available for the world to see digital manifestations of their preferences, beliefs and personal space.

More importantly, however, the digital story project goes deeper than a mere public display of the personal, in seeking to encapsulate the students' own personal engagement with the cultural narratives and thematic threads that they have encountered during the course of their study and tell a story that highlights their journey—or someone else's who is close to them—towards understanding themselves, their social surroundings, their place in a tradition or even their visions for the future. Many of these stories are about memories the students never experienced themselves, the migration stories of their ancestors, who may come from Greece, Mexico, or Pakistan.

In addition to the affective parameter that is essential for learning and growth, DST may lend itself to sound instructional design, in that it aligns itself with key principles of foreign language pedagogy. The collaborative script writing and peer reviews that are part and parcel of DST cultivate the ground for articulating and implementing the five "C" goal areas of the World-Readiness standards for teaching.

"Communication" is achieved as learners narrate and interact to share, understand, and critique stories of, for example, migration.

"Cultures" is evident in critically reflecting on the products, the perspectives and practices that are entailed in such experiences.

"Connections" are made, as learners of various backgrounds and geopolitical affiliations, HLLs and SLLs, use their respective strengths and competences to work together to solve problems, while also discovering common grounds in the origins of the diverse journeys that brought their relatives or "subjects" to the United States.

"Comparisons" in the form of intercultural exchanges allow the students to reflect on the concept and challenges of the "journey" from different cultural and linguistic perspectives.

"Communities" are manifested in the way stakeholders of various socio-political and ethnic backgrounds come together using the Greek language to participate in a wider community, where common topics such as "the pursuit of happiness" or "the search for a better life" are experienced and articulated in different ways.

Most importantly, the DST project provides a space for every student's socio-affective needs to come into being, by situating all the different cultural identities in class in a dialogic relationship with one another, in a transcultural and translingual environment that allows each person to conceive of themselves as a "foreigner" in the eyes of another and tell their story: as adventure seekers, responsible citizens or activists, family members, granddaughters and grandsons, study abroad students, all in Greek. I leave you with a digital story example from a HLL in second year Greek.

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