Introducing online teaching in Humanities: A case study about the acceptance of online activities by the academic staff of classical languages

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show the perceptions of the academic staff of classical languages (ancient Greek and Latin) concerning use of online activities during their courses. The study was carried out in three countries: Greece (three major Universities), Spain (University of Barcelona) and the United States (University of California, Berkeley) with the participation of thirty-three academic instructors. Depending on the level of use and acceptance of the ICT and following G. Moore's classification, we separated the participating academics in three groups: the *conservatives*, the *mainstream* and the *early adopters*. The fact that the smallest group is the third clearly shows the necessity for teachers' preparation and training before introducing innovative projects in the classroom. Since the starting point for the application of innovation in the classroom is the teacher, policy makers should focus on helping them become conscious of changes in teaching methods and include their opinion during the design of innovative projects.

Key words

e-learning, new teaching methods, Classics and ICT, teaching culture

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Resum

L'objectiu d'aquest article és mostrar les percepcions del personal acadèmic de les llengües clàssiques (grec antic i llatí) amb relació a les activitats en línia fetes durant els cursos. L'estudi es va fer a tres països: Grècia (a tres universitats importants), Espanya (a la Universitat de Barcelona) i els Estats Units (a la Universitat de Califòrnia a Berkeley) amb la participació de trenta-tres professors acadèmics. Segons el nivell d'ús i d'acceptació de les TIC i a partir de la classificació de G. Moore, vam separar els docents participants en tres grups: els *conservadors*, el *corrent principal* i els *adoptadors primerencs*. El fet que el grup més petit sigui el tercer mostra clarament que hi ha una necessitat de preparació i formació dels professors abans d'introduir projectes innovadors a l'aula. Com que el punt d'inici de l'aplicació d'innovació a l'aula és el professorat, els formuladors de polítiques s'haurien de centrar a ajudar-los a conscienciar-se dels canvis en els mètodes d'ensenyament i a incloure la seva opinió durant el disseny de projectes innovadors.

Paraules clau

aprenentatge virtual, nous mètodes d'ensenyament, estudis clàssics i TIC, cultura d'ensenyament

Introduction

In the last decades there has been a growing interest among universities in the use of the internet for teaching and learning. In addition, new technologies have changed the nature of open and distance education by providing learning communities for teachers and students where they can interact with each other even if they are situated in different geographical locations. The importance of interaction in forms of flexible, online and distance education has been researched and described at length – whether learners interacting with individualized computer programs or learner-to-teacher or learner-to-learner interaction that at a distance requires the mediation of technology (Moore, 1989; Garrison *et al.*, 1998). Online learning in university language departments is used mostly in order to support face-to-face teaching and learning and its application has offered some very important benefits to both instructors and students.

In spite of the above advantages of the use of ICT in learning activities, when we talk about online course delivery in Classics departments, the situation gets more complicated. One reason is that there are often limited funds available. Another is that the diverse skills and knowledge required for the above roles are not formally described. Finally, the tradition of these departments has kept them far from the technology, which began to influence education and course delivery in recent decades.

Until now, we have not been able to find any department of Classics that applies a complete online language course in its curriculum. Universities that are open to innovation and technology have designed online activities, online exercises, quizzes, surveys and online theoretical feedback for students, but there is no complete course delivery with periodic and stable interaction between the members of a virtual community/classroom.

Research methodology

This study took place in three countries: Greece, Spain and the United States (California). More analytically, a total of thirty-three academic instructors with various specialties in the sector of Classics participated. Their general characteristics (gender, university and specialty) and their institutions' policy concerning the use and application of ICT in learning activities are shown in the table below:

Country / Institution	Number of participants	GenderMale/ Female	Specialty	Institution's policy about ICT
Spain (University of Barcelona)	10	40% / 60%	Ancient Greek language, literature	Advanced use of ICT in the classroom, online activities on the web. An online course under construction.
Greece (University of Athens, Patras and Crete)	15	46% / 54%	Ancient Greek language, religion and mythology, literature, history, and Latin	Average use of ICT in the classroom, use of the internet for instructor-student communication
USA (University of California, Berkeley)	8	75% / 25%	Ancient Greek language,papyrology, literature, archeology, Latin	Average use of ICT in class, variety of online activities available

Table 1. The general characteristics of the participating instructors and their departments' policy on ICT

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This general information about the participating academic staff shows that they all belong to institutions with interesting research activity and their opinion about the issue of introducing information technology in Classics can be very useful for policy makers and administration in order to improve the conditions in humanities for innovation and online course delivery.

In the first phase of the study, participating instructors answered a survey, which contained three basic parts: In the first part, apart from the standard demographic questions, they had to provide information about their "digital profile" (personal use of ICT, preferences, etc.) and their knowledge concerning the use of ICT (studies in computer science, in-class activities with ICT). In the second part of the survey, they were asked to evaluate the introduction of ICT in Classics and to answer whether they believe that they and their students have sufficient knowledge to participate in such innovation. Finally, in the third part, the instructors had to discuss the most important problems they face regarding the use of ICT for online course delivery, advantages and disadvantages of such courses and propose possible solutions.

The second phase of the study contained face-to-face interviews with almost half of the participants (42%). The interviews were planned after data analysis of the survey in order to collect more information about topics that weren't developed in depth in the survey. More analytically, from the interviews we had the opportunity to collect additional information about the teaching activity of participants in relation to ICT. Instructors were asked about the structure of their courses, their content and the possibilities of developing an online course with the existing conditions in their departments. Finally, they were asked to propose groups of courses for which they could develop online delivery easier than others. It is important to mention that the academic staff that was interviewed expressed a general preoccupation about the future of their departments and the funding they receive every year from their universities. It was a common belief that new strategies need to be designed in order to attract more students every year and to offer them more job opportunities.

The data analysis of these two phases was based on G. Moore's classification of teaching staff according to their attitude toward new technologies and to innovation. Applying Moore's (1989) concept in our study, we can distinguish three general categories of Classics instructors, a) the conservatives, who are not open to innovation and do not trust ICT for their course delivery; b) the mainstream, who, even if they are in favor of an evolutionary change in teaching, are risk averters and face ICT usability problems; and, c) the early adopters, who are open to innovation in their courses, are risk takers and have strong capability in the use of ICT. The table below shows a comparative description of the characteristics (also approached by Zayim *et al.*, 2006; Gillard, 2004) of the three categories.

| Early adopters	Mainstream Faculty	Conservative Faculty
In favor of a revolutionary change in teaching	In favor of an evolutionary change in teaching	Prefer stability and keep to traditional teaching methods
Take risks	Avert risks	Do not take risks
Focus on the efficiency of their teaching in students' knowledge. Creation of new roles in the classroom and new teaching methods.	Try to combine teaching all the contents of the course with the introduction of some innovative teaching methods, if possible	Focus on presenting all the contents that appear in their course's syllabus
Strong capabilities in the use of ICT in learning activities	Face usability problems with ICT	Do not use ICT in their courses
Believe that ICT can be easily combined with the tradition of Classics	Believe that it is possible to combine tradition with ICT, but there are many problems to be solved	Do not believe that ICT can be successfully introduced in Classics departments
They are experimenters	They want proven applications of recognized value	They do not want to try any kind of applications
The majority does not need technical support while using ICT applications, they are self-sufficient	They need significant support while using ICT applications	They cannot use ICT applications without support
Visionary attitude	Pragmatic attitude	Conservative attitude

Table 2. The characteristics of the three categories of instructors according to their attitude towards ICT

Case study results

According to Rogers (2003), individuals in a social system do not adopt an innovation at the same time; a certain percentage of individuals are relatively earlier or later in adopting a new idea. The characteristics mentioned in the previous paragraph determine the instructors' willingness to adopt an innovation and their leadership functions. The general results of the study showed that the majority of the instructors belong to the mainstream category (46%), followed by the conservative group with 30%, while only 24% of the participating instructors were identified as early adopters. The following diagram offers a schematic representation of the study results.

Figure1. Instructors' categorization on the basis of their acceptance of innovation.
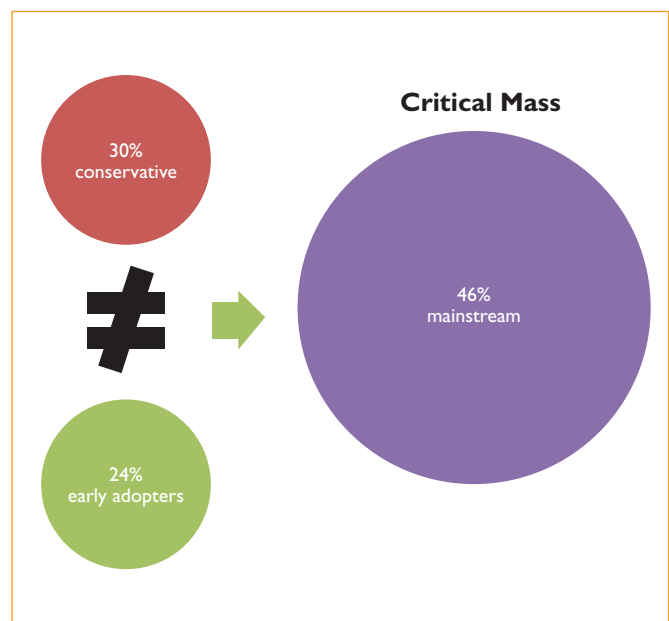
It is important to mention that the gender and age of instructors didn't play an important role in their categorization since we had almost the same number of both senior and younger instructors, and men and women in all three groups.

The crucial issue for decision makers and those who design innovation projects is to bridge the "chasm" (as it was described by Moore, 1991) between the mainstream category (which is the biggest) and the early adopters. A study conducted in Canada (Anderson, *et al.,* 1998) concluded that "comprehensive adoption strategies cannot be based on support of early adopters, but must be designed to appeal to the mainstream faculty", staff who are "better integrated into the traditional administrative and social norms of faculty culture" (p. 94), drawing from mainstream faculty the role models that are essential for the diffusion of innovation. Moore also developed the same idea by saying that many technologies initially get pulled into the market by enthusiasts, but later fail to attain wider adoption. So, the designers of innovative projects for education should come up with strategies that will help them build a bridge across that gap and attract a bigger mass of individuals. Also, it is much more difficult to convince and collaborate with the conservative category because, as can be seen from the results, they deny taking any risk or trying new teaching methodologies in their courses. Therefore, the best practice would be having as the main target group the mainstream category, which is bigger and more flexible. If the mainstream category believes in change and innovation, then it would be easier to approach the conservatives, focusing on the change and activities of the (ex) mainstream category. Even if this attempt fails, it would not be of great importance since it is not obligatory for everyone

to participate in change. The fundamental goal of innovation is to convince the majority of the teaching stuff, which consists of the early adopters and the mainstream faculty (70% of the total).

The following results concerning the characteristics of the three categories can serve as an important pillar for decision makers and project designers, which can help their attempts to bridge the "chasm."

Characteristic 1: Attitude towards change in teaching (in general)

Only 20% of participating instructors were in favor of revolutionary change and were characterized as early adopters, while 50% (mainstream faculty) was also in favor of change but with limitations, since they believe that revolutionary changes can lead to less effective teaching and learning. On the other hand, three out of ten instructors (conservative) mentioned that the teaching methods and structure of Classics departments do not need any changes because they have functioned for many years without changes and without significant problems.

Characteristic 2: Attitude towards risk and main teaching focus

As far as the second characteristic is concerned, 40% of participating instructors belong to the mainstream group. They said that they try to introduce innovation in their courses when possible, but at the same time they are risk averters, since they do not trust many of the new teaching models. Three out of ten instructors were identified as risk takers who try to create new roles (for both students and instructors) in their courses.

Characteristic 3: Skills in using ICT for learning activities

Only 15% of the instructors can be identified as early adopters concerning their skills in using ICT for learning activities. These individuals have studied computer science for personal use and use ICT every day in their personal life and almost every class they give.

The majority of the instructors (55%) belong to the mainstream category since they haven't studied computer science and use ICT occasionally at home. In their classes they often use simple ICT applications, such as PowerPoint presentations, email and internet.

Characteristic 4: Combination of traditional teaching methods with the use of ICT

This characteristic is the most accepted by the instructors of Classics, since 70% believe that it is possible to combine current

traditional teaching methods with ICT. Half of them (35%) believe that it is possible to combine tradition and ICT, but that there are many problems to be solved.

## Characteristic 5: Open to experiments

The majority of participants do not have a problem experimenting with new teaching projects, but only 30% can be characterized as real "experimenters" (early adopters). The majority said that they are open to evaluating new projects and teaching methods, but need to be proven applications of recognized value in order to introduce them in their courses.

Characteristic 6: Need of technical support while using ICT

Only five out of the thirty three participating instructors (early adopters) consider themselves to be self-sufficient and do not need technical support while using ICT applications in learning activities. Even these five instructors seem insecure when faced with complicated ICT applications. The majority of instructors (55%) said that they need significant support during the application of a learning activity with the use of ICT, as they are self-sufficient only when using very simple applications (use of internet, email, PowerPoint, chat).

After this data analysis, and in order to give a title to each of the three groups of instructors, we can say that the early adopters have a clear *visionary* attitude for teaching Classics, the mainstream category a more *pragmatic* attitude and the conservatives a *restricted* and *conservative* vision of their profession. A schematic representation of the above analysis is shown in the following graphic.

Figure 2. Instructors' categorization in every characteristic
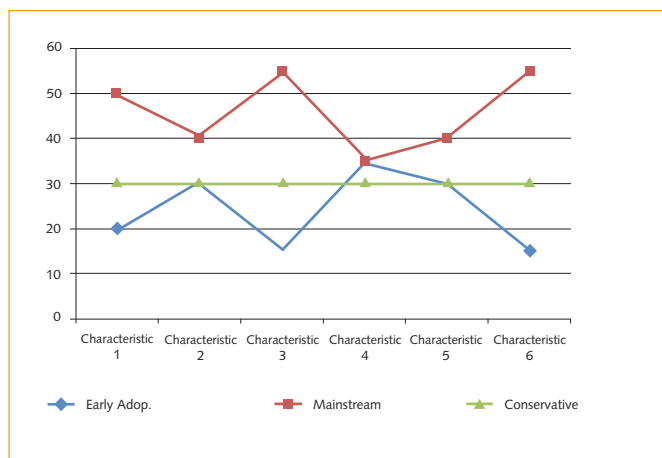
Conclusions

After analyzing the results of this study, a general conclusion is that administration, policy makers and innovation designers should take into consideration the idiosyncrasy of Classical Studies before introducing any new teaching methods involving the use of ICT. Simply because an innovative pedagogical project has been successful in science departments or in engineering doesn't mean that it will have the same acceptance or efficiency in departments of Classics, which have been working for many decades with almost the same structure and teaching methods. It is very important to make clear the fact that, because of their tradition, these departments need additional information, training and resources in order to be able to follow the rest of the sciences in this growing interest in the use of ICT in teaching and learning. This study does open a window for facing this issue, but this is an area that needs further research.

More analytically, one of the most important parameters for successful application of an innovative ICT teaching project in Classics is the need to convince the instructor of its efficiency. As stated by Bates (2000), "because of the central role that faculty members play in the work of Universities, any change in core activities, such as teaching and research, is completely dependent on their support". In this context, administration and project designers should begin a dialogue with the teaching staff (Wilson *et al.,* 2004) about:

a) the project's advantage (does the innovation represent an advantage over current ways of teaching?);
b) the project's compatibility (is the innovation compatible with existing needs and expectations?);
c) the project's complexity (does the innovation make life simpler or at least not contribute more complexity to teaching duties?);
d) the project's trialability (can the innovation be tried without a commitment to completely change current practices?); and, finally,
e) the project's observability (is the innovation visible to potential adopters?).

It would be fruitful to build this dialogue on the work of the early adopters and diffuse their knowledge, skills and experience, showing, at the same time, that the majority of the rest of the faculty (mainstream category) is very close to reaching that level.

Another important issue is the need for technology training, not only for teaching staff, but for students as well. It is obvious that the majority of the instructors in Classics departments do not have the necessary knowledge of ICT. Accredited training courses should be used for teaching staff as a vehicle for dissemination of staff development in ICT. Until now, there are no reported official courses for Classics instructors, but it has been proven in other

science specialties (Edwards, *et al.,* 2000; Littlejohn, 2002) that the majority of mainstream instructors show a significant improvement in understanding and managing the new technologies after attending these courses and come closer to the early adopters' category. As far as students are concerned, our research showed that they have a higher level of understanding and use of ICT than their teachers, but still need more training in order to participate actively in innovative ICT projects.

Finally, it must be made clear that online course delivery approaches do not attempt to replace face-to-face teaching and learning. The majority of the instructors in Classics departments believe that these innovative teaching methods will eliminate the role of the teacher as a physical presence and the tradition of the Classics departments, which has been based, until now, on the instructor's transmission of knowledge to students through face-to-face teaching. In this context, it should be clear that the main objective of ICT activities is to empower traditional teaching methods and provide students with easier and more attractive ways of learning. Thus, an emphasis on innovation rather than on technology should be adopted by explaining to instructors that the new learning environments created are an opportunity for them to try new teaching methods without requiring a high level of ICT knowledge[1].

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Born in Athens, he is a graduate in Classical Philology from the University of Patras. He also has a Master's degree in Southeast European History and Culture from the National University of Athens, a DAS (Diploma of Advanced Studies) in "Education and Society: Evaluation of Educational Programmes" and a Master's degree in Teaching and Learning in Digital Environments from the University of Barcelona. His PhD (2009) focuses on teaching Classical Greek with the use of ICTs in higher education. Over the last five years he has participated in various national and European projects on educational technology and distance education (E-learning activities, Minerva, 5th FP, etc.). Since 2005 he has collaborated as a university teacher and researcher with the University of Barcelona (2005-2007), the University of California, Berkeley (2007-2008), the Autonomous University of Barcelona (2008-2009) and the International University of Catalonia (2009).

1. This is not the case at the UOC, where there are no courses in classical studies, though there are complete e–learning courses in Latin that form part of the Humanities, and Catalan Language and Literature courses (alongside a wide–ranging offer for English and French). As we mentioned above, digital technologies have led to substantial changes in recent decades in open and distance education.

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Annexes

1. The questionnaire given to the participating instructors in order to collect information about their digital profile.

Questionnaire on your relation with new information and communication technologies (ICTs)

The objective of this questionnaire is to obtain information regarding the attitude of Classics faculty on the use of ICTs in learning activities. The questionnaire is part of a PhD thesis aimed at improving learning of ancient Greek in higher education, carried out in the Department of Methods of Research and Diagnostics in Education at the University of Barcelona. Respond honestly and read the questions carefully before answering.

Year of birth:
Gender:

1. Do you have a computer at home? Yes__   No__
   If not, do you have regular access to a computer in another place?

2. Do you have internet connection?
   Yes___ No___
   If yes, what type?
   MODEM____   ADSL____   Cable___
   Other____

Mark the options that reflect your situation with an "X":

3. You normally use the computer to:
   A. Prepare my classes
   B. Play
   C. Search for information in networks
   D. Communicate with others
   E. I never use it
   F. Others (specify)_____

4. What type of programs do you use?
   A. Word processors
   B. Databases
   C. Graphics programs
   D. Network programs (internet)
   E. Communication with other people (e-mail, chat)
   F. Others (specify)_____

5. How did you acquire the information and skills that you currently have regarding computers?
   A. I learned in my free time alone at home
   B. I took a computer science course

C. Technicians in my department showed me some basic options
   D. I have never been interested in this subject and I haven't learned
   E. I learned after much practice and experimenting at work
   F. Others (specify) _____

6. What problems do you have with use of computers and data processing?
   A. The programs are very complicated
   B. I don't understand how computers work
   C. A lot of time and dedication are required for learning
   D. Problems with cables, connections and jacks
   E. I need a more powerful computer to continue learning new things
   F. Others (specify)_____

7. Is it of interest to you to learn to use computers and other elements of ICTs in your job as professor?
   Yes__   No__   Don't know__

8. In what way(s) do you think that learning about ICTs would be useful in your courses?
   A. It can make the explanation of my area or subject easier
   B. It may be good to introduce it in classes as a more innovative element
   C. It can be another option in the classroom
   D. To prepare didactic material
   E. To obtain up-to-date information and introduce it in my lessons
   F. Others (specify)_____

9. How would you assess your knowledge of ICTs?
   A. No knowledge at all
   B. Basic knowledge
   C. Advanced knowledge
   D. I am an expert in technologies

10. How many times a month do you use technologies (internet, computers, multimedia programs, videos and social software) in your classes?
    A. Never
    B. 1-2 times
    C. 3-6 times
    D. More than 6 times

11. Please write the type(s) of technology you use during your classes (PowerPoint, videos, internet, etc.)
    _____
    _____

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12. Do you believe that the gender and age of a professor are important parameters for their knowledge and attitude concerning use of ICTs? Do you notice differences among your colleagues (younger vs. older, males vs. females)?
——————————————————————————
——————————————————————————

Thank you very much for devoting your time to fill out this questionnaire! Your collaboration helps to improve learning of the Greek language. If you have any question or comment, you can send an email to **vlachopoulosdim@hotmail.com** with your suggestions.

2. Analysis of the instructors' answers

Questions from the questionnaire	RESPONSES OF THE 33 PARTICIPANTS					
	Age: 25-30 (11%)	31-40 (22%)	41-50 (33%)	over 51 (33%)	Gender: Males (51%)	Females (49%)
Question 1	Yes: (100%)			No: (0%)		
Question 2	Yes: (100%)			No: (0%)		
	A: (40%)		B: (40%)	C: (20%)		D: (0%)
Question 3	A: (89%)	B: (4%)	C: (100%)	D: (93%)	E: (0%)	F: (4%) (Listen to music)
Question 4	A: (84%)	B: (67%)	C: (36%)	D: (64%)	E: (93%)	F:(0%)
Question 5	A: (64%)	B: (31%)	C: (11%)	D: (13%)	E: (62%)	F: (0%)
Question 6	A: (33%)	B: (4%)	C: (56%)	D: (84%)	E: (22%)	F: (0%)
Question 7	A. (84%)		B. (16%)		C. (0%)	
Question 8	A: (73%)	B: (89%)	C: (22%)	D: (67%)	E: (51%)	F: (9%) (Attractive for students)
Question 9	A: (0%)		B: (62%)	C: (33%)		D: (4%)
Question 10	A: (25%)		B: (9%)	C: (22%)		D: (44%)
Question 11	Power Point (71%), digital photos (69%), internet (53%), virtual platforms/electronic dossiers (22%), videos (18%), multimedia audio (18%)					
Question 12	No difference between males and females (84%) Males have more technological skills (12%) Females have more technological skills (4%)			No difference between younger and older (44%) Younger people have more technological skills (52%) Older people have more technological skills (4%)		

3. Guide for the interviews with instructors

1. Indicate your specialty and describe the subjects you impart.
2. Indicate the methods for learning Greek that you would recommend to a student of Greek philology.
3. Express your opinion on the introduction of new technologies in the social and humanistic sciences.
4. Do you think that an online course in ancient Greek, in combination with on-site education, would contribute to students' learning? Why?
5. Do you think that students of Classic Philology have sufficient knowledge and necessary resources at their disposal to be able to participate in an online course: computer, internet, user-level knowledge of office automation (Word, Power Point, chats, forums, databases, etc.)?
6. In your subjects, do you demand work from your students that, for its solution, requires a computer and internet connection? If yes, please explain the type of work you request.
7. Describe the tools that you used for developing an activity or learning process.
8. Do the students attend your classes? What percentage of them attend regularly (80%)? Are there subjects with less attendance by students? Which ones?
9. What do you believe is the main reason for students' absence from class?
10. How would you assess the approach to morphology of the ancient Greek language?
11. Are there enough hours of class, in the curriculum, for the teaching of morphology?

12. What would you add to the teaching of morphology?

13. What do you believe to be the most difficult topics of morphology for students? Which grammatical areas does the professor have to focus on the most?

14. How would you assess the approach to syntax of the ancient Greek language?

15. Are there enough hours of class, in the curriculum, for the teaching of syntax?

16. What would you add to the teaching of syntax?

17. What are the most difficult topics of syntax for students? Which areas of syntax does the professor have to focus on the most?

18. Are the hours devoted to teaching methodology of translation, in the curriculum, of ancient Greek texts, sufficient for students to learn to translate on their own?

19. What would you add to the teaching of texts and translation?

20. How would you assess students' results in ancient Greek language subjects?

21. Compare the level of difficulty of ancient Greek language subjects with others in Greek Philology: mythology, literature, Greek thought.

22. How would you assess the idea of the existence of an online course – with the same content, structure and objectives – for your subject as a support for on-site learning?

23. How do imagine this course: its structure, the roles of faculty and students, class schedules, homework, etc.?

24. What additional comment would you add on the topic of teaching of the ancient Greek language that you believe to be important and that hasn't been mentioned in the previous questions?