



Odysseus Project: an European Project for the Dissemination of Modern Greek Learning and Teaching

Alicia Morales Ortiz, M. Ángeles Martínez Cegarra

amorales@um.es, mamc2@um.es

University of Murcia (Spain)

Abstract

During the years 2008 and 2009 the University of Murcia has coordinated the Odysseus Project for the Dissemination of Modern Greek Learning and Teaching, a trans-national project funded by the EC, within the Lifelong Learning Programme. Institutions of Italy, Bulgaria and Greece have also taken part in the project. The objective of Odysseus has been the dissemination of Modern Greek didactic materials elaborated by previous EU projects, within the overarching goal of fostering the Greek Language, which has just a small space in the European linguistic map, but also a long and rich history. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overall presentation of the project and its activities, as well as to analyse some specific aspects related to the teaching of Greek in the framework of the promotion of "less widely used and less taught" (LWULT) languages.

1. Background to the Odysseus Project

The Odysseus Project came into being through a wider collaboration among several European institutions of education devoted to teaching and disseminating Modern Greek. Odysseus was the culmination of an intense effort in the area of Modern Greek teaching that began in 2003. Our idea was to contribute as far as we could to enriching the teaching resources of a language that clearly has nothing like the demand of other "big" European languages like English, French, German or Spanish but which has, nevertheless, enjoyed increased interest over the last twenty years.

The focus of our work then shifted in two directions: On the one hand, we decided to concentrate on creating a method of teaching Greek at an advanced level, as this was the area most lacking in modern, up to date materials. The result is *Travel to Greece III*. On the other, it seemed useful to try to design some teaching materials for Greek for special purposes (Greek LSP), since this was an area that had barely been explored in Greek, although one of the most explored in other languages, especially English. The result of this work was the publication of two manuals; *Greek for Business* and *Greek for Science*.

The greatest difficulty encountered was to promote our materials and make them available outside the spheres of the institutions where they had been developed. Clearly, the value of new learning materials is small if they do not reach their potential users, if they do not become part of the teaching materials that are *truly* available in *real* teaching environments.

Given this situation, our network of partners decided to present a new proposal to the European Commission which, in essence, was a strategic plan to disseminate and exploit the materials within the more general framework of promoting Modern Greek teaching and learning. The proposal was presented in the 2007 *Lifelong Learning Programme*, under *Key Activity 4 "Dissemination and Exploitation of Results"*.

On this occasion the project consortium includes institutions of higher education from both the public sector (University of Murcia) and the private (British-Hellenic College), a private professional training institute (ECED), a non-profit making public organization (Agenzia per il Patrimonio Culturale Euromediterraneo) and a company that specializes in educational software (Elea Computer Systems Ltd). The most outstanding features of our consortium – and of those who have helped this cooperation experience to be of extraordinary interest – are its heterogeneous nature, the variety of its fields of action and its diverse target audience. Indeed, each member, as well as the countries and



regions where they are located, has its own peculiarities and particular needs as regards teaching Greek, and this has greatly enriched the activities of the project.

2. Objectives and Target Groups

As indicated above, the main aim of our project was to disseminate the teaching materials of Modern Greek as a foreign language and Greek for specific purposes.

From this starting point we have sought through *Odysseus*:

- a) to enrich existing materials through the free and widest possible distribution of our materials.
- b) to achieve the broadest and an most effective use and exploitation possible of these materials.
- c) to contribute in increasing the numbers of people learning Modern Greek as a foreign language at all levels.
- d) to promote the teaching and learning of Modern Greek, a language that is used and taught little (LWULT Language).
- e) to exchange experiences and good practices between the institutions involved in the project – the member institutions but also other ones and external associations. These are related to the management of transnational projects, the teaching methodologies of Greek, the elaboration and application of teaching materials, the design and programming of Greek courses, the planning and organization of dissemination activities etc.

Odysseus has striven to reach a wider audience than the direct beneficiaries of the institutions. So, the groups targeted by the *Odysseus* activities were:

- Educational institutions that specialize in teaching Greek
- Entities, societies and associations of all types involved in teaching or disseminating the Greek language or culture
- Teachers of Greek
- Students of higher, professional and secondary education.
- Emigrants (in Greece)
- Professionals working in Greek businesses or who aim to develop their career in Greece.
- In general, anyone interested in learning Greek, one of the languages with the longest and richest history in Europe.

3. Dissemination and exploitation strategy. Activities carried out under the *Odysseus* Project

In *Odysseus* we designed, from the outset of our activities, a dissemination and exploitation strategy that, in broad terms, has proved to be reasonably effective.

The first step was to make a careful analysis of potential users of the project (i.e. those who might be interested in its activities and who might benefit from them) and draw up an exhaustive register of people and institutions related to our sphere of learning.

Secondly, we carried out the dissemination and publicity activities conceived to make our project and materials better known. This was done through the usual channels: mail and email dispatches to our mailing lists; design of a website with information about the project, preparation of promotional materials, press releases, advertisements in the press and on the radio, public presentations etc..

Thirdly, we also sought efficient *exploitation* of the results of the project and its teaching materials. This is only possible if they are used in a real classroom, both on language courses organized under *Odysseus* and by teachers of Greek around Europe who decide to make use of them. With this aim, three hundred copies have been made of each of the CDs (*Travel to Greece III*, *Greek for Science* and *Greek for Business*) and were distributed among educational institutions all over Europe. The exploitation also included a platform within our website where the materials could be directly downloaded, the organization of cultural seminars and workshops, attendance and participation at congresses and expert forums.



In this regard, the project closed in December 2009 at the University of Murcia with the *Odysseus Project Final Conference* and the general theme of *The teaching of Modern Greek in Europe: current situation and new perspectives*. It brought together a wealth of representatives from the partner institutions, specialists and teachers from other places. It was conceived as a forum to debate on the current situation of the teaching of Greek in Europe, the problems it faces and the perspectives for the future.

The impact of our website has been impressive. From its start in October 2008 through to the end of Marz 2011 more than 147.000 downloads of our teaching materials have been made from all corners of the earth.

As for the courses and seminars, if we focus only on the language courses, we have, thanks to *Odysseus*, been able to teach Greek free to 280 people at different levels and in different countries. If we include the participants on the various seminars, workshops and cultural activities, the figure is much higher. So the balance in this regard can be said to be highly positive. These various training activities carried out under the project have enabled the following:

- through specific seminars for teachers, present our teaching materials within the framework of new methods for teaching Modern Greek, with special insistence on the use of ITCs.
- through beginners' level courses, bring new learners to Greek
- through higher level courses help those with some knowledge of Greek to progress further.
- through workshops and cultural activities, inform about aspects of Greek history and cultural and social life to a public that in many cases will have had no previous contact with these.

In conclusion, we believe that we have helped to stimulate the demand to learn Greek and to enhance the visibility of the language and culture of the Greece of today in our surroundings, which was among the central aims of the project.

4. Promoting and teaching greek in the european multilingual area.

It is well known that the European language policies of the last decades have emphasized the importance of knowing foreign languages and have sought to stimulate respect and promotion of language diversity as a means of integrating and strengthening multiculturalism in Europe. Languages are the best exponent of the cultural richness of Europe and the importance of their being promoted, taught and used seems obvious. Yet it also seems desirable, and inevitable, that in this global world a *lingua franca* will be promoted to favour fluent communication between citizens in the common European area. So the key issue lies in how to combine both these aspects and how to assure protection for the minority and lesser used languages, like Greek, in a world in which "strong" languages, notably English, will be a threat to its very life.

All this has been given form in a series of measures taken by European authorities in recent years. The efforts of the European institutions in this sphere are, without any doubt, proving decisive, in both economic terms and in terms of awareness-raising among citizens and language policy-makers. Yet at times these efforts are slowed down by the cumbersome wheels of the national states when it comes to implementing real measures, not to mention the difficulties of bringing in effective changes in educational systems. The latest reforms by universities to adapt to the European Area of Higher Education are a unique opportunity to promote the learning of foreign languages, although even here things are not easy.

So we are still some way, in general lines, from reaching the aims proposed in Barcelona. So it is that the Commission has recently drawn up a specific strategy to promote multilingualism. The last resolution of the Council passed in this respect (November 2008) includes in its *desiderata* the efforts to "broaden the choice of language teaching at the various levels of education, with the inclusion of the recognized less extended languages so as to enable students to choose according to personal interest or geographical location".

The funding and support granted by the European Commission to the *Odysseus* proposal is a good example of these policies. Thanks to them, it has been possible to carry out activities aimed at disseminating Greek and providing training in this minority language, which would not otherwise have been available.

Yet the main issue here is how to pave the way for citizens to access Greek, a language spoken by barely 3% of the EU population and, at the most, 15 million people all over the world. In this



respect we would like to recall the report commissioned by the European Commission to the committee chaired by the writer A. Maalouf to commemorate the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. The report was entitled *A rewarding challenge. How the multiplicity of languages could strengthen Europe* and it seeks to show to what extent promoting linguistic diversity is basic in European integration. The report parts from a distinction between the “language of international communication” and the “adopted personal language”, that language that the user learns for not necessarily professional or economic reasons, but because of a personal, cultural or intellectual interest for the language or the country of the language. This “adopted personal language” would be taken on by the learner as a “second mother tongue”. From this starting point, the report advocates the creation in each country of a group of competent speakers motivated by each of the European languages. This would benefit bilateral relations more than would the *lingua franca* of the common area.

It seems to us that this idea of a “personal adopted language” is very useful in the case of Greek. In this respect we can, on the basis of some of the data gathered from the *Odysseus* courses at the University of Murcia, make some affirmations:

Approximately only one third (36,37%) of the students who enrolled on our first Greek course under *Odysseus* had studied Modern Greek before. In contrast, an overwhelming majority (80%) had at some time studied Classical Greek. Furthermore, almost half (49,1%) had been in Greece. In response to what their motives were for studying Greek, the majority replied that it was interest in Greece and its culture. This was followed by “for the pleasure of learning a language” and “to travel to Greece”. In general, professional reasons were not determining reasons. Reasons like “to get a better job”, “to study in Greece” or “to work in Greece” hardly figured among the reasons chosen. Besides, there was an overall deep interest in learning about the culture of Greece. The most attractive areas were, in order of preference: history, art, literature, music and cinema.

The data given do not differ much from those obtained with the last *Eurobarometer*. The most common reasons given by Europeans there for studying a foreign language were “to use it at work” and “to get a better job”, which appear in third and fifth place, while at the top were “to use it on holidays abroad” and “personal satisfaction”.

All the above leads us to some final considerations about aspects that, in our judgement, have to be present in any attempt to disseminate the teaching of Greek [1]:

- stimulate the learning of Greek as a “personal adopted language”.
- promote bilateral relations between Greece and other countries, involving in this process groups of citizens on both sides who have adopted the respective languages as “personal adopted languages”.
- take advantage of previous knowledge of Classical Greek for faster and more efficient learning of Modern Greek.
- make use of the cultural prestige enjoyed by the (Classical) Greek language and culture in Western tradition as a means to attract new students to the study of Greek.
- always combine the learning of the language with an approach to Greek culture in all its aspects and periods.
- become aware that knowledge of a minority language like Greek along with a mastery of other “strong” languages supposes added value in certain spheres of work (e.g. in translation and interpretation studies)

Bibliography

[1] Cf. A. Morales Ortiz, C. Pagán Cánovas, C. Martínez Campillo (eds.), *The Teaching of Modern Greek in Europe: Current Situation and New Perspectives*, Murcia 2010.