

Daniel Streett

SBL – Applied Linguistics for Biblical Languages Section

11/20/2010

1:00 PM to 3:30 PM

Room: International 3 - Marriott Marquis

Are Aural-Oral Methods Worthwhile for Teaching Greek?

In my presentation today, I will be attempting to answer the question, Is oral-aural Greek pedagogy worthwhile? I need to begin with a clarification. What do we mean by oral-aural pedagogy? This could be taken in a minimalist sense to mean the incorporation of speaking and hearing in a Greek class. But this is hardly controversial. All textbooks teach students a method of pronunciation and encourage students to pronounce the words out loud. Most Greek teachers have their class read Greek out loud at least occasionally. And, more recently, we have seen the production of audio resources for Greek vocabulary by Jonathan Pennington, and Greek paradigms put to familiar tunes by K. Berding.

But, what I will be discussing today takes oral-aural pedagogy in a maximalist sense. Perhaps a better term to describe what I am referring to is teaching Greek as a living language, or teaching Greek using modern second-language or foreign-language acquisition methods. Take, for example, French. Any class in modern French that follows contemporary principles for second language acquisition is going to be aimed at developing 4 skills, primarily listening and speaking, and secondarily, reading and writing in French.

So, the question before us is, are such methods worthwhile for teaching ancient Greek, specifically the Common Greek that we find in early Christian literature of the Hellenistic age?

In order to answer that question, I want to walk you through the thought process that led me to my present position. First, as is probably true of all of us, the reason I originally wanted to learn Greek was to read the NT in its original language. As a young student, I wanted to be able to judge between English translations, to use commentaries that discussed the text's grammatical features, to do word studies, etc. I wanted exegetical precision. I wanted to preach from my Greek NT.

My initial training in Greek was in an almost purely deductive method. Paradigms and vocabulary were memorized. Tests asked me to parse, reproduce paradigms, provide one-word English glosses for vocabulary, and translate brief sentences that had usually shown up before in homework.

While I excelled in my Greek classes, as I progressed, I soon realized that while I had developed real proficiency in parsing, diagramming, discussing linguistics, and using Greek tools to analyze small sections of text (a verse or two), I did not have the ability to read Greek at any length without stopping to consult my charts or my lexicon. The deductive method had made me an atomistic analyst—it had failed to teach me to read Greek.

I therefore decided to pursue reading courses that would give me a chance to read long portions of text. It was here that I gained greater exposure to Greek outside the NT—I took, for example, Greek reading courses in LXX and various Classical authors. I found my vocabulary increasing at a much faster rate and found myself much more comfortable with common grammatical constructions that appeared frequently in my readings. I was still, however, left unsatisfied. Though I had now studied Greek intensively for four years, my vocabulary was still severely lacking and the speed at which I was reading was very slow, as I often had to pause to look up a word or form, or write out a translation so that I could make sense of a complex sentence.

While I was in the dissertation phase of my PhD, I began to teach Greek full-time at a small Christian college, where 6 credit-hours of Greek were required of every student. At this point, I began to think carefully about Greek pedagogy. I had studied Greek by now for six years but I could hardly claim fluency. While the NT was fairly easy reading, the breadth of the vocabulary in the LXX challenged me, and the writings of Philo, Josephus, and other more literary Hellenistic authors were pure drudgery, requiring constant recourse to the lexicon and English translations.

I had to admit that on any meaningful definition, I did not know Greek. I knew linguistic metalanguage. I knew how to use Greek tools. I knew English glosses for the limited vocabulary of the NT. I could translate most NT passages on the fly (largely because I had read them so many times before). But I had no worthwhile functional ability in Greek. My reading was in fact *translating*. I had very limited ability to write in Greek (actually: to translate from English to Greek). And I had virtually no ability to speak Greek, or to understand Greek texts read out loud (which is the way early Christians would have originally encountered them!).

Was there a better way? Was there a way of learning Greek that would allow me to internalize it so that I could *think* in Greek, rather than translating from Greek to English, or English to Greek? Was there a way of acquiring vocabulary that did not involve brute-force flashcard or word-list memorization? Was there a way that I could avoid wasting the *next* 6 years of my Greek study?

Indeed there was, but it was counterintuitive. I began to read, on the advice of Randall Buth, the work of experts in the field of Second Language Acquisition and Foreign Language Teaching. I quickly found that there was an overwhelming consensus that the best way to learn a language was by *immersion* in that language, beginning with simple, easily understood words, motions, and commands, and slowly and incrementally increasing in complexity. Only by *hearing* the language and *using* the language could it truly be internalized. Explicit teaching about grammar helped little if at all with gaining actual proficiency in the language. The writings of Stephen Krashen and James Asher were especially helpful in describing optimal language pedagogy.

This all made perfect sense. It was the way everybody learned their *first* language. By hearing and following simple commands. By attaching words to things. Then, slowly and haltingly and with many mistakes, speaking and getting others to do things for them. No tests, no quizzes, no grammatical terminology, no rules, just lots of hearing and speaking in a friendly environment with lots of immediate feedback.

It was also the way that everybody who successfully learned a *second* language had done it. Many of my grad school peers had attended guided immersion experiences in Germany. They came back in 6 months much more proficient in German than they were in Greek or Hebrew, which they had studied for many years. College French majors spent their third year abroad and saw their largely dormant language skills flower into fluency.

Why didn't Greek teachers use the same methods that Pimsleur, Berlitz, Rosetta Stone, and other language teaching companies used? Why did they still use the grammar-translation method—pedagogy that, as I had discovered, no second-language-teaching experts had accepted as valid for 150 years now?

The answer, unfortunately, was obvious. Everyone I talked to said the same thing: “Koine Greek is a dead language. We don't want to learn to speak it, just to read it.” By now, however, I knew better. I knew that years of Greek had failed to make me an even halfway-proficient reader of Greek. While I could *translate*, I could not *read*. I could not read, because I could not *think* in Greek.

I also knew that everyone learned their first language by hearing first, speaking second, and reading third. For most children, reading is preceded by 4-5 years of hearing and speaking. In fact, it is that hearing and speaking that make reading possible. The language is internalized by hearing and speaking. Reading is as easy as recognizing the written form of the words that you *already* know. It is a much lower-order activity than hearing and speaking. It allows much more time to process information than listening or speaking does. Put simply, if you want to learn to read a language, the best way to do it is first to learn to converse in the language. This is what was so counterintuitive.

We all know this. It's why PhD students in Theology and Biblical Studies go to Germany for a semester even though their ultimate goal is only to be able to read German. It's why a French literature major in college will spend her Junior Year at the Sorbonne when her ultimate goal is simply to read, for enjoyment and criticism, the works of Camus, Dumas and Voltaire. It's the great reader's paradox. To read for enjoyment you must be fluent in the language. But you cannot become fluent in the language solely by reading. (Speaking and hearing are especially crucial at the early stages of language acquisition. Later, once an oral-aural basis has been established, reading takes on a more important role.)

Recent research has stressed the need for *automaticity* in word recognition if we are to read fluidly. By automaticity we mean that there is no delay or virtually no delay between seeing a word and recognizing it and understanding it. The reason automaticity is so important is that our working memory has a 10-second limit. In order to comprehend what we are reading, we must get a complete thought off the page and into our working memory within 10 seconds. Consider, for example, if you were reading a 15 word sentence in Greek and consciously translating each word. That translation process takes about 1 second per word, which means that by the time you hit the 11th word in the sentence the first word in the sentence had dropped out of working memory. When you finished reading/translating the sentence you would need to go back to the beginning and re-read it in order to comprehend the complete thought. We've all had this experience, I'm sure, especially while reading works with more challenging vocabulary. The

only way to get the automaticity that we need is to establish a direct link between word and meaning and to eliminate the intervening and brainpower-consuming process of translating into English. And the only way to do this is to hear and speak Greek in interesting and comprehensible way.

Dead or not, then, I concluded, we had better start treating Greek like a living language if we really wanted to be able to read it. And, in any case, was it really dead? I could accept that a language like Ugaritic or Hittite, for which we possess only fragments of a language, was dead. We don't have enough extant vocabulary. But we have more ancient Greek than we could read in 10 lifetimes. There is appropriate vocabulary for everything under the sun. LSJ has over 100,000 lemmata. The supplement to LSJ alone has 20,000 entries! TLG has over 200,000 lemmata. We have as complete a linguistic record as we could hope for. And, to top it off, we have a modern version of the language that provides us with words for modern items. Most of the words are based off classical roots, like αυτοκινητο (car), and require only slight modification to make them Koine in morphology.

So, I launched into teaching Greek as a living language, while also teaching myself. My classes started off with every student receiving a new Greek name and a crash course in Second Language Acquisition theory. Then we moved to basic commands like “give” “put” “jump” “sit” “stand” and vocabulary for classroom objects like “wall” “table” “chair” “light” “trashcan” and “book.” My students were learning in the first week –μι verbs that most grammars put off till the next to last chapter.

We also covered the usual English as a Second Language topics: numbers, colors, body parts, names, animals, family members and jobs. Out-of-class work was done with audio resources modeled on Pimsleur conversational lessons: “Hello” “How are you?” “Where are you from?” “Do you know Greek?” “A little.” Students were given software with a flashcard set that included the Greek word, audio of its pronunciation, and on the flipside, a picture of the action or object the Greek word referred to.

Class time could include games in Greek (Κίνδυνος/Jeopardy!) or είκοσι ερωτήματα (20 Questions); UNO is another great option, especially for mastering numbers. Other activities included Bible stories told in Greek using a Bible picture book to illustrate; slide shows with pictures from the news or movies that we could describe and ask questions about in Greek, short stories in Greek that could be acted out, told and retold, communicative tasks like making a purchase, or my favorite—making a Day of Atonement sacrifice. At home, my students would label as many household items as they could with the right Greek words.

At first, I felt bad when I had my students learn words like δακτύλιος (ring), that were used very infrequently—in this case only once in the NT. Shouldn't they be learning more frequently appearing words, like αμαρτια (sin) or χαρις (grace), that appear hundreds of times in the NT? But, then I realized that this was the very thing that made Greek real to them—concrete words that they could use on a regular basis and that they needed to map their world in Greek. And, even though a word like δακτύλιος might only appear once in the NT, it appeared 38 times in the LXX. Why limit ourselves to the NT and not to the NT's Bible? Indeed, why limit ourselves only to words in the Bible? Why not teach the language, not a text? Why not teach my students a

word like ξανθος that appears only once in the LXX, in Leviticus? By learning ξανθος and using it frequently they were learning the morphology and grammar of adjectives with a word that had a lot of content to it.

I learned several lessons from teaching Greek this way.

Πρῶτον, I didn't know Greek. At all! While I had a large passive vocabulary, I had a miniscule active vocabulary. I had to look everything up at first. How do you ask "How are you" How do you say: "touch your head?" "Give me the book." "Sit in the chair?" It seemed to me that all the words we tell our Greek students are "irregular" were in fact the words a real speaker would use regularly: put, give, go, stop, push, pull—can you say these in Greek? Well, neither could I. To put it mildly, mistakes were made.

In the past year, my wife and I acquired a Chihuahua, whom we named Athena, and—what else?—trained in Greek. Chihuahuas are not very smart—their brains being about the size of a pea—but Athena has done well with her limited resources. Due to my wife's rigorous training, Athena now responds to "sit: κάθου" "lay down: κατάκεισο" "come: δέυρο" "eat: φάγε" "walk: περιπατεῖν" "outside: έξω", well-done: καλῶς, stretch:έκτεινον, fetch/bring: φέρε, heel: παρὰ, go into your crate: εις τὴν θήκην, and my personal favorite, when she has been let outside: ούρησον. When I say παῦσαι or ουχί, Athena cowers. I tell you this not to brag but to let you know in truth that my dog knows more Greek now than I knew when I began teaching!

Δεύτερον, teaching this way is hard and very demanding. Not only did it require all my free time outside of class to prepare audio and written resources and to plan class, but it also required a lot of discipline in class to keep the class in the language. How could someone who knew as little Greek as I do it? Keep it simple. Have lots of repetition. Don't try to introduce more than 5 words an hour. Internalization happens slowly and as the result of a lot of comprehensible and interesting input in the form of repeated interaction.

For example, you could use a Total Physical Response technique: αψαι τῆς κεραλῆς σου. δειξον μου τας χεῖρας σου.

You can ask simple questions: τί εστιν; πόσους δακτύλους έχω;

A picture helps, too.

With those kind of activities, students are getting exposed to lots of Greek, in all different cases, numbers, tenses, persons, moods, and voices. And they are understanding it, internalizing it—moving beyond thinking in English and making the direct connection to Greek. This is why listening to lots of comprehensible Greek is so important. The average person speaks at a rate of 100-150 words per minute. If you think about that, the average page of double-spaced text contains 250 words. So, if you speak Greek to a class at a regular pace—say 100 words per minute—after ten minutes of questions and answers they have interacted with the Greek equivalent of about 4-5 pages of Greek! In ten minutes! Contrast that with the usual homework assignment in a Greek grammar – something like 10 or 15 sentences – which the students translate over the course of a week.

Τρίτον, my students had no fear of the usual hobgoblins of beginning Greek study. The irregular was normal for them. They feared no third declension noun—they didn't even know they existed. Deponent, schmeponent! Their passive vocabulary grew very quickly. In one year we covered a thousand vocabulary words—three times as many as most textbooks. And they were understanding them in both spoken and written form, and in most cases had active command of them too.

Τέταρτον, I learned that this method actually made Greek fun. When I was a student, Greek class dragged on interminably. In living Greek, class seemed to fly by. In my student days, I would walk out of class stressed out about the new material I had to memorize. In living Greek, students spilled out of class chattering back and forth in the language.

Πέμπτον, I learned that even tests could be fun. How did I test my students? Well, every class was a test, as I got instant feedback on whether they were learning by their level of participation. But, formal assessments were all in Greek—yes, the questions, the instructions, the page numbers—everything. They consisted of matching, fill in the blank, multiple choice, reading comprehension questions—just what you should expect if you intended to test understanding rather than rote memorization ability.

Έκτον, I realized that internalization was actually happening. They were listening to me speak in Greek and were responding immediately. They were tracking with the stories rather than trying to translate. Certain elements of the language became automatic for them. And, for the first time, I felt that *I* was actually internalizing Greek as well. I no longer needed to translate everything that I read. While Philo and Josephus and Plutarch still posed a challenge, the LXX and the NT became a pleasure.

Έβδομον, I was “putting feet” to my linguistics. Using the language made me think at much deeper level about word order, linguistic register, tense/aspect, and semantics. Speaking and hearing the language (especially with a modern, Byzantine, or reconstructed Koine pronunciation) made me much more aware of rhythm, assonance, the role of possible misunderstanding, and made the various morphological shifts in verbs and nouns, especially the oblique cases of the third declension seem natural.

Perhaps the most important lesson I learned, however, through continued interaction with colleagues and fellow scholars, including many discussions on blogs and the B-Greek email list, was that I had shifted into an entirely different paradigm regarding Greek pedagogy.

In the living language paradigm, fluency was the goal. To truly know the language. To be able to read with ease, to discuss the reading *in Greek* with ease. To write emails back and forth with ease. To truly know the language. To be able to describe my entire environment in Hellenistic Greek, from my σιρικόν to my υποδήματα, from my ιματιοφυλάκιον to my αφεδρών.

In the grammar-translation paradigm, especially in seminaries, the focus is analysis, linguistic description and precise translation. The language is treated as a code, unintelligible apart from English. The only vocabulary worth learning is that which appears in the NT (and maybe the LXX). A successful student is one who can parse verbs correctly, use the tools to do word

studies, and discuss the grammatical issues in a given passage that would affect its exegesis. It is hard for me to see how such a student can be said to have *learned* the language.

It is also hard for me to see how such a method is worthwhile. Which method, I ask, seems more worthwhile? It seems to me that as Greek teachers, we are usually teaching students who in some form or fashion hope to be teaching the Bible for the rest of their lives in a public setting, be it academy or church. Does it not make sense to ask someone who will be spending 10-20 hrs a week preparing to teach or teaching the Bible for the next 30-40 years to spend 2-3 years immersed in the original languages, to gain a “feel” for the Greek and the ability to read the text fluently for pleasure and understanding? Is it too much to ask that Seminaries and Bible Colleges—whose stated goals are to train pastors and teachers, and whose curricula claim to be devoted to the study of the Bible in the original languages—to conduct their classes in those original languages, just as German classes in every German major at every university are conducted solely in German? Is it too much to ask that Greek professors, at the very least, be able to read fluently and widely all the Greek literary remains of the Hellenistic era, so as to speak with true authority on matters of style and lexicon?

- German programs have a German house where German majors can live 24/7 in German. Where are the Greek and Hebrew houses at our seminaries?
- Trekkies put on plays and operas in Klingon—a made up language. Where are the seminaries whose students will perform passion plays or Christmas pageants in Greek or Hebrew?
- Tolkien fans write poetry in Elvish. Where are the seminaries whose students will compose worship songs in Greek or Hebrew?
- The Living Latin movement hosts *conventicula* and *rusticationes* where Latinists immerse in Latin for a week during the summer. Where are these events for scholars of the Greek NT?

You may say I’m a dreamer. But I’m not the only one. There is a rising tide of excitement about living language methodology on internet forums and now, even at the SBL. The students and scholars who are sitting in darkness have begun to see a great light. New resources in print, audio, and video are currently in development and more and more immersive opportunities are being introduced each year.

So, to return to my original question: Are living language methods worthwhile for Biblical Greek? My answer is: yes. If you actually want to learn *Greek*, and not merely *about* Greek, living language methods are the *only* thing worth your while.