

# **Students research and modify teaching and their perceptions of a subject: a students as co-researchers approach**

## **Introduction**

In this paper I discuss the research process I applied while working with my high school students. My basic aim is to explore the relationship between a teaching / learning problem and the action research process through which we attempted to solve it. I wish to demonstrate how students can deal with a real problem they face in their school life by reflecting on their learning experience and acting collectively, in conjunction with their teacher, in order to shape and test insightful solutions.

The paper consists of three parts. The first presents the research context and the initial problem that instigated the research. The second part discusses the theoretical and methodological issues that led to specific research choices, shaping the research project. The third part describes the research process and its evaluation. The paper is completed by certain concluding comments.

### **1. Research context and teaching / research problem**

#### **1.1. The research context**

The research presented here was conducted between November 2005 and March 2006, lasting five months. This was the original teaching setting.

*The students:* a classroom of 30 Y8 high school students (age range 13-14) at a state Pilot High School in Piraeus, Greece. The children came from middle class families, quite keen on the children's education. The majority of the students in question were diligent and showed great interest in the teaching process. Most participated actively in the class, though there were also some silent children.

*The teacher:* I was their teacher, teaching all subjects related to Greek language and literature (9 hours per week) for the second consecutive year. In the previous school year (11 hours per week) we had nurtured a very good relationship of mutual trust and predilection for cooperation. In my classroom, students were used to conducting projects, working in groups, and participating in alternative methods of teaching, learning, and evaluation.

Besides, I have a long and substantial experience from action research. I was personally involved in many ways in action research: as a teacher participating in a group of teacher researchers, as a facilitator in three action research projects and as a critical friend in an action research conducted by a friend for his doctoral thesis. My involvement permitted me to become familiar with data collection and analysis methods used in action research, and with patterns of reflection that may lead to a deeper understanding of teaching practices and the construction of knowledge.

Often had I engaged in informal students' consulting in the past, thanks to my action research experience, the teaching innovations I implemented, and the relationship I shared with the students in question. I was interested in their opinion, and urged them to discuss the standards of the classroom and the school (Flutter & Rudduck 2004). Moreover, as I organised various extra-curricular activities in class, I had developed ways of listening to students, as a way of problem prevention.

*The school and school system in general:* the Greek school system is highly centralised. Frequent exams dominate secondary education, controlling student learning in terms of the syllabus. The curriculum is usually viewed as a set of pre-determined goals, to be met by covering a specific syllabus. Teacher monologue is considered to be a very efficient and time-saving method, as opposed to alternative teaching methods, which are usually time-consuming. Syllabus pressure and exams stress allow practitioners little room for initiative, especially as there is a single schoolbook per subject matter, distributed nation-wide by the Ministry of Education. However, in 2003, the official curriculum became interdisciplinary. By 2005-06 the new books implementing the new curriculum had yet to become available, but teachers could try out new interdisciplinary teaching methods.

At the same time, educational research in Greece is dominated by the quantitative paradigm, reflecting positivistic views on research, its findings and resulting theory. Although qualitative methodologies, like action research, have become more widespread over the past few decades, their validity is often challenged, while their findings are not generalisable. This holds even more true for research methodologies like action research, where practitioners themselves intervene in the curriculum, instead of simply implementing it, as mere objects of research.

It can therefore be said that the general research context both posed restrictions and opened possibilities for our research.

## **2. The research problem**

The problem first appeared at the beginning of the school year (2005-06), when my students had just entered the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade of high school, and noticed that the teaching time of Ancient Greek (AG) had been increased by one hour per week, at the expense of French. This decision of the Ministry of Education created problems both for the students and for me:

- The children had to study many languages simultaneously: Modern Greek, Ancient Greek, English, and one more foreign language (not to mention foreign students, who also studied their mother tongue at home or at language schools).
- Apart from increasing the allocated teaching time, the Ministry changed nothing about how AG was taught. Curriculum and schoolbook contained but a few creative activities to bring AG close to the students' life, or activate them. The official AG textbook consisted of units, which began with a short Ancient Greek text to be translated into Modern Greek, continued with the Vocabulary section (an ancient word is chosen, and lists of derivative and compound words in Modern Greek are provided), and was completed with the Grammar section (a

linguistic phenomenon was taught in the traditional way, e.g. declension of adjectives, with inflection tables to be memorised by the students).

Under these circumstances, the students protested in class: “Why should we learn a language we are never going to speak?”, “Why was an hour of second language teaching – which is useful in our everyday lives – replaced by an hour of AG?” Day by day I observed that previously active and critical students were now increasingly silent; they refrained from participating, as if they were scorning the subject. Student perceptions of the subject started to worry me, because I knew the educational process could be dramatically affected by them. The change of these perceptions was crucial for the teaching and learning process, and it seemed that monologue interventions, promoting the subject’s value, would be fruitless, especially since I had no answers for some of their questions. Thus I started thinking that the appropriate way to demonstrate or even prove the subject’s value to them, would be to have them conduct research on it. The research questions had already been set by our first discussion: “Why do we learn AG?”, “What do we gain?”.

At the same time, I felt partly responsible for their negative reaction, because my AG class was quite traditional; following the textbook’s structure brought me great embarrassment. For me, the problem was how to enhance my AG teaching, breathing life into it. In the above context, my questions were: “What were my expectations of the students?”, “What were the subject matter’s aims?” (this matched the students’ question above), “Could student expectations enhance teaching?”, “How could I bridge the gap between the disappointing reality and our expectations?”

To deal with this problem, I needed a research methodology that would enhance teaching and learning, pay heed to the students’ voice, and engage both my students and me in a reflective process. Their questions and my concerns led to an action research project aiming at:

1. Actively involving students in the research process, by shaping their participation framework.
2. Presenting how this framework was shaped, not to promote it as a model of student involvement in action research, but to instigate a debate that would offer new ideas to teachers and students in other pedagogical contexts.
3. Enhancing teaching and learning, by implementing the above framework.

## **2. Theoretical and methodological context**

Four key issues informed the shaping of the student participation context, enhancing the teaching process:

1. The particular type of action research chosen.
2. The degree, ways, and quality of student participation in the research.
3. The pedagogical theory used and the teaching/learning principles chosen.

#### 4. The curriculum theory implemented.

Regarding the first key issue, various types of action research exist today (see Carr & Kemmis 1986; Grundy 1987; Elliott 1991 and 1993; Zeichner 1994; Carr 1994; Hollingsworth & Sockett 1994). The various types are due to different epistemological groundwork, diverging aims, and different relationships between theory and practice, or between researchers and researchees. Following the work by Elliott (1991; 1993) and Zeichner (1994), I hold that these various types form a continuum; at the one end we find the technical version of action research (of positivistic origin) and at the other its practical / critical version (originating from the hermeneutical paradigm, which includes critical control by participants, thus aiming to emancipate them from ideas that restrict them).

Within the narrow range of initiative available in a centralised educational system, I have participated in action research projects conducted by small groups of practitioners who attempted to initiate change in their personal professional development, increasing their students' chances to enhance their learning and their life. They were oriented towards a democratic education and society, and examined the social consequences of their actions by challenging the belief that what they had learned was natural and therefore unchangeable. Some projects were more successful, leaning towards the practical / critical version of the above continuum, while others remained more technical, limiting themselves to skin-deep improvement.

In the research presented here I acted as an isolated teacher, aiming at promoting the assimilation of democratic principles and appraising my practice critically. In this, I was driven by a greater ambition: to involve my students in the critical examination of teaching and learning, making them my partners, in a practical / critical research context.

This brings us to the second key issue. The participation of students in action research always concerned me. In the projects I had participated, students were but a data source; research practitioners simply listened to them. It perturbed me that such an important voice was so under-utilised. I couldn't reconcile this with my theoretical groundwork, as it reminded me of the positivist epistemology that treats students as objects to be identified and measured. In the context of practical / critical action research, I felt that the students, as main receivers of the educational process, should be considered partners in the research process. I was certain that, by merging the voices of everyone involved in the educational process, we would be able to construct ways of working that are emancipatory in both process and outcome. Furthermore, the participation of the problem facing groups in the problem-solving process places the solution in context, rendering it more appropriate than any other general and abstract solution. Besides, when students research aspects of their own culture, they offer invaluable data and points of view (Atweh et al. 1998).

However, I did not know how to actively involve students in research, until I came across literature from the last decade, on "students' consultation" and on ways of reinforcing the "students' voice", as a means of inviting young learners into a conversation about teaching and learning, so that their role would change from being

an object of research attention to one of active participation (Flutter & Rudduck 2004: 20). I found research describing how students themselves identified issues they saw as important in their daily experience in school, with the support of staff in facilitating and enabling roles, gathered data, drew conclusions together and put forward subsequent recommendations for change (see Egan-Robertson & Bloome 1998; Fielding 2001; Kerr et al. 2002; Flutter & Rudduck 2004; Dagley 2004; [www.consultingstudents.co.uk/index.html](http://www.consultingstudents.co.uk/index.html)).

I knew the problem that had emerged in my class offered itself for student consultation, as it concerned teaching and learning in class (McBeath et al. 2003: 7; Flutter & Rudduck 2004: 20), while it was shared by both teacher and students (The ESRC Network Project Newsletter 2001). Moreover, the above described research context displayed elements I felt would encourage student participation in the research. Frankly, I was keen on listening to what my students had to say, while they were interested in the educational process and wanted to participate in the research because they felt it concerned them. Also, our mutual trust allowed for genuine dialogue in which students could speak without fear of retaliation.

Before I could shape the framework of student involvement in the research, I had to understand what is meant by student involvement, and take decisions on three main issues:

A. On the degree of their involvement, that is the level of their participation. I followed Fielding's four-fold model (2001), which distinguishes between: (i) students as sources of data, (ii) students as active participants, (iii) students as co-researchers, and (iv) students as researchers. I was aware of the difficulties inherent in involving students as researchers (demanding student research experience, requiring more implementation time, etc.) and aimed at a 3<sup>rd</sup> level student involvement.

B. On the ways they would get involved, that is on how they would participate as co-researchers. My aim was to become the facilitator and support the students conducting the research. This meant the students had to participate throughout the action research cycles: planning, data collection and analysis, reflection and re-planning, write-up and dissemination (Kirby 2001: 74). Data would be collected by my students and me, through various means, which we would propose and select together.

C. On the quality of their participation. For student participation to be qualitative, it was crucial they engaged in deep reflection, as through reflection and dialogue they could reach the understanding necessary to propose interventions for involvement. Researchers from similar projects have repeatedly stressed the value of dialogue (between students and their teacher or peers) (Lincoln 1993: 42-43; Fielding 2004: 307). Therefore, the framework of student participation had to be guided by the need to develop deep reflection and genuine dialogue.

The third key issue was the choice of a pedagogical theory that would conform to the epistemology of practical / critical action research and the students as co-researchers model. Such a research would lead to the active production of knowledge

in a social constructionist way, by the very individuals whose situation is being researched. Students could stop being consumers of knowledge and become producers. Of course, this requires appropriate teaching and learning processes, different from the usual practice of knowledge transfer from teacher to students (reflecting the positivist paradigm in education). In this context, I was all but forced to choose constructivist and collaborative learning. To conform to the above described research epistemology, we needed a teaching / learning framework where knowledge is constructed collectively in class, by directly involving and activating students through research projects and activities that utilise their experiential knowledge (Johnassen 1991). In the constructivist classroom I wished to create, students had to work in groups, reflect on their prior knowledge and experience and talk about what and how they learned ([www.funderstanding.com/constructivism.cfm](http://www.funderstanding.com/constructivism.cfm)).

The fourth key issue concerns implemented curriculum theory. Theories which place emphasis on target setting, school effectiveness and tangible results were completely inappropriate for the research and teaching / learning context I wished to create in my class. They refer to external (non-school) control of positivist nature. Such curricula reach schools ready for implementation, detached from the values that provide them with meaning. They are only imposed because the designing / constructing agent is hierarchically superior (Fielding 2004: 302-303). What I needed was an alternative, person-centred perspective, which would allow my students and me to reflect on the curriculum and relevant in-class activities; through reflection and dialogue we could create our own proposals and test them in class, to improve teaching and learning. This alternative perspective was the Process Model in curriculum development (Stenhouse 1975). It allowed us to view curriculum and textbook as a simple proposal, which we could modify according to our findings from our research. Moreover, this model is flawlessly combined with constructivism, as it requires research and promotes thinking, reflection and dialogue. This choice made possible the negotiation of the curriculum in class, contributing substantially to the shaping of the student participation framework.

### **3. The action research process**

#### **1. Starting off**

After outlining the problem we shared, I proposed to my students to tackle it by conducting a research. They responded enthusiastically; everyone would participate.

I then explained how we would conduct research and collect data, and asked them to keep a personal journal with an entry for each AG class. I chose journal writing believing it would help students draw linkages between thoughts, actions, behaviors, beliefs and values and offer them the opportunity to attribute meaning to experiences by reflecting upon them in writing (Andrusyszyn & Davie 1997). In educational settings journal writing can promote personal growth (Mezirow 1990), as it can stimulate critical thinking. I stressed they would have exclusive access to their journal, as I wanted them to feel free to record their genuine thinking, not what they thought would please me. If they wished, they could show journal extracts to me or

their peers. I also informed them I would record my thoughts and class observations in a journal myself. In order to help them with their journals, I gave them some questions to guide their notes, but also the freedom to write down anything they wanted or thought was worth mentioning. In this initial phase, the questions dealt with their observations and impressions of the class before the research: “What did I find interesting in the 1<sup>st</sup> unit of textbook? Which difficulties did I face? What did I find creative and pleasant?”. After they had answered, we engaged in a classroom discussion on the question “Why do we feel AG has no value?” The discussion revealed various reasons, but most students insisted on how problematic they found the texts; they seemed incomprehensible. Even if they understood the meaning word for word, as I provided the translation, the texts seemed distant, foreign and pointless. They would answer any accompanying questions with the rhetoric dictated by the questions themselves: with uncritical admiration for the Ancient Greek culture.

This discussion delineated the first parameter of the problem under study and helped pose the first question: “How could we approach the texts to make them meaningful for the students?”

## **2. The First Cycle**

Right after this question was explicitly expressed, but before we could engage in joint solution planning, a change occurred in my class. When teaching the 2<sup>nd</sup> textbook unit, after reading the public resolution on the protection of democracy in ancient Athens proposed by Demophantus, I pointed out that this was neither a narrative nor a historical text, but a decree of the Assembly of the Demos. The students’ attention was immediately drawn to this text genre. As soon as I gave them the translation of the text, one student said how strange the resolution seemed to her, and how she would feel if she had been present at the time. At once the rest of the students manifested their interest, imagined themselves as ancient Athenians, and talked about fear, insecurity, and terrorism. They did not see “Athenians’ great sensibility towards the protection of democracy”, as prompted by a textbook note. Students transcended the textbook’s didactic prompt to admire ancient Athenians for their devotion to democracy, read the text in their own way, and formed their personal discourse, not arbitrarily, but based on the text and on their own social experiences. Teaching then changed its course, as a question was born: “How did the citizens of Athens reach such a decision, such a resolution?” On their own initiative, the students started collecting data on the historical context of the era (the oligarchic regime of the Four Hundred and the restoration of democracy) and on that basis they judged the words and the decisions of historical personalities. The text then became meaningful for the students, perhaps differently for each student, but still, it had a real meaning, it made sense! The text stopped being a group of strange unknown words and was placed in context.

As soon as I completed teaching the text, I invited them to study the changes in the subject’s teaching, and their resulting reactions, answering in their journals: “What changed in today’s class?”, “Which changes did I find positive and which negative?”, “What else should change?” At the same time, my own journal revolved around two themes: what took place in class (what had changed and how the students reacted) and how the students advanced regarding their research duties. Whenever we completed a textbook unit, the students discussed their journal entries, working in six

groups of five. The idea of group discussions came from the students' great desire for team work and from my perception that journal writing is actually a form of dialogue that enables participants to reflect on themselves and share these reflections with a team of peers (Roderick 1986: 308; Graybeal 1987). Besides, I believe that collaborative sharing can instigate greater change in the classroom than can individual reflection (Zeichner 1996). Each group had a coordinator and a taker of minutes. In these discussions the students reflected on preceding processes, based on their journal notes, they agreed and disagreed, they analysed and substantiated their impressions, views, and suggestions, they tried to convince others, and at the end they composed a text with the results of their negotiations. Thus each group presented me a written report of the students' conclusions for each guiding question. These reports, along with my journal entries, were the object of a recorded classroom discussion. The different data collection methods and the reflection on two levels (journal keeping and group and whole class discussions) ensured data triangulation, though the sources were actually two.

Almost all student reports mentioned it was helpful to know a text's genre when reading it. The text was directly linked to life in Ancient Greece, helping them reconstruct the conditions that created it. That is, the text became meaningful as soon as they understood the communication circumstances under which it was written ("Who wrote it?", "Why?", "For which audience?"). Bearing this observation in mind, during the discussion I asked them which texts could offer us insight into the conditions that created them, but this was beyond them. Still, it was quite a student achievement when a student, at the end of the discussion, summed up what had been discussed: *"The most effective way to learn a language is through the text. When we find the text's content interesting, we learn about the era when it was written, about the atmosphere of the time, about the mentality and views of people, and we forget that translating is boring and the words are unknown"*. Between these lines, one can find the text-centred approach to language teaching (see Georgakopoulou & Goutsos 1999). Of course, students were unfamiliar with this theory, but they discovered it through the research process. They did know its didactic implementation, since this is how they approached texts in Modern Greek. The value of the students' discovering and developing educational theories is stressed by the practical / critical action research context, the model of students as co-researchers, and the theory of constructivism.

### 3. The Second Cycle

Knowing what interested students and how to help them with text reading, I decided to bring to the class data and pose questions on the text to be taught, regarding its genre and socio-historical context.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> unit's text was a Byzantine chronography. Since there are also contemporary chronographies, I brought one in the class so we could compare the two, while one group of students had to study the evolution of this text genre through time. When studying the text itself we focused on the communication circumstances under which it was written ("Who wrote it?", "What is the writer's role or attitude towards the content of the text?", "Who is the text addressed to?", "Why?", "Which views does it represent?"), its linguistic style and how the stylistic choices depend on



the writing circumstances. These issues steered the teaching towards the text's socio-historical context. We used other historical sources to shed light on the era, linking Ancient Greek to History. The students' positive reaction to the connection of AG to History, as well as the need to focus my teaching on the text, led me to new decisions.

For the next text, we tried intertextual connections: we related the dialogue between Croesus and Solon, as recorded by two different Ancient Greek writers, a literary author (Lucian) and a historian (Herodotus); we then compared Plato's and Herodotus' accounts of the Persian king Darius' senseless arrogant commands. Intertextuality gave new perspectives to the class. It opened up a dialogue among texts, but also a dialogue between students, texts, and the socio-cultural environment that created them. Moreover, it helped the students connect ancient texts to contemporary life. Consequently, when I taught the aggressive reaction of Athenians to Phrynichus' tragedy *Capture of Miletus*, the students compared it to the reaction of American citizens to movies that reminded them of the Twin Towers' horrid events. This was naturally followed by a broader comparison between Ancient Athens' dominance in the Aegean Sea and the USA as a world superpower today.

During the approach of the above texts, students kept writing in their journals, participated in discussion groups, wrote their reports and handed them to me. They provided me with feedback on teaching innovations I implemented in class, both by their in class reactions and by their explicit report statements. When we completed these texts, we held a whole class discussion.

Data revealed categorically that students sought learning opportunities to attribute meaning to texts according to their own cultural experiences (Tsafos, 2004: 108). The students recognised and mentioned it explicitly: *"We would like to bring the text's main characters into contemporary life, to compare them to people from our everyday lives"* (report no4, student group B). Impressed, I had written in my journal: *"When Dimitris (a mediocre student who seldom spoke) talked comparing Ancient Athens to contemporary America, everyone's eyes shone. I could see they suddenly realised that what we were reading could concern every individual, every people, every state, even in contemporary times. They love seeing that the ways people react are the same after 2.000 years"*. The class discussion included similar observations. The students' desire is based on the teaching principle of connecting the teaching with their lived experiences (see Dewey 1916; 1944). Again, the students personally "discovered" elements of educational theory.

The students immediately perceived intertextual activities as an innovation, noting their learning value: *"In order to relate the text to pictures or other texts, first we must fully understand the ancient text, otherwise we can't relate it to anything. We can't see any connections by rote learning and translation."* (class discussion extract). It is particularly important that they perceived the potential of teaching a text by intertextual comparison. It became clear to them that such activities open up perspectives of interpretation that would otherwise remain inaccessible.

Regarding the linking of AG to History, most students were positive from the beginning: *"The best part of AG is the text, because it is pleasant and it relates to other subjects, particularly History"* (report no4, student group A), *"Texts comprise History, and that makes them interesting"* (report no4, student group D). It impressed

me that students viewed Ancient Greek texts as historical sources, as opportunities to learn about other ancient civilisations: *“Through texts we learn about the Ancient Greeks, but also about other nations like the Persians, how they thought, how they lived, what kinds of political regimes they had”* (report no4, student group C). Again, while the schoolbook guided us to compare these civilisations to Greek culture to promote the latter’s superiority, the students were critical; they would not compare situations that lacked common points of reference. Since no student would do so, I engaged in such a co-relation and underlined the superiority of Greek civilisation, following the schoolbook (and other traditions). But a student cut me short, saying: *“Not more of the same, miss. Not more of how Greeks were always the best, always superior...”*

The second cycle revealed that interdisciplinary and intertextual connections provided students with new hermeneutical perspectives. Students became more critical towards the text, in terms of how they approached it and how they enjoyed the teaching process, since they could now see the text as a vehicle of meaning, which interested them greatly. These observations guided my planning towards the reinforcement of interdisciplinarity (linking with other subject matters) and intertextuality (comparison with other text genres).

#### 4. The Third Cycle

The teaching of the next cycle built on the concept of intertextuality, relating the textbook text to relevant pictures, either contained in the book or provided by the students. By expanding the concept of “text” we can explore the intertextual connections between written texts and pictures, since contemporary linguistics considers a complex variety of social events as texts: posters, video-clips, advertisements, websites, music concerts, etc. (Kress 2000: 182-202). So we related the text on the birth of Christ of the Gospel according to St Luke to paintings by Domenicos Theotokopoulos (El Greco) and to Greek Orthodox religious icons, and St John the Chrysostom’s oration on Resurrection to Eastern mosaics and to Roman Catholic frescos. The intertextual connection activities loosened the strict distinction of subjects (Bernstein 1991) – already observed in the case of AG and History – and became pretexts for interdisciplinary activities. A colleague who taught Religion responded immediately, helping us examine relevant religious issues that emerged.

While I was quite content with the variety of interdisciplinary connections (to Religion and History of Art), and the students were making pointed observations on the different styles, commenting on the corresponding different mentalities, some students (about ten) started to protest they were not learning AG, but Religion or History or Arts. They fervently expressed their reservations on group discussions, where I could observe their discontent. It did not reassure me that they only had one argument: *“This doesn’t help us learn AG. What will we do in Senior High?”* The rest of the class engaged in deeper reflection trying to convince them of the value of interdisciplinary activities: *“School isn’t about the Ancient Greek language, but about the Ancient Greek spirit”* (class discussion extract). The minority’s resistance was gradually reduced, though the reasons for this were obscure. Was it because they were given the opportunity to realise the value of such interdisciplinary activities or did they fake liking these activities to please their peers and me or to stop feeling a minority?

The point is that these ten students engaged us in reflection that alarmed us about the teaching of Grammar, in spite of the general euphoria. The issue appeared increasingly often in group reports, while I observed the students didn't respond to my attempts to focus on specific parts of the text (to justify stylistic choices or stress the connections between the meanings of different sentences). These observations revealed the second parameter we had to study: the teaching of Grammar. In order to design an improvement intervention, I asked my students to make their proposals, based on their journals and discussion groups.

The subsequent class discussion was revealing: students viewed grammar as a "necessary evil" and found the memorisation of endings quite tiresome. They also thought the textbook didn't offer much help: "*Some phenomena are explained down to the last detail, others are not. There are many phenomena in each unit, and we can't afford the time to assimilate them all*" (class discussion extract). After thoroughly elaborating it in group discussion, one student group proposed a change: "*When learning Grammar we shouldn't place great emphasis on phenomena we already know from Modern Greek, but focus on their differences and peculiarities, otherwise they become boring and confusing*". I wanted to pursue this idea, but another group raised a more important issue: they wondered why I wouldn't show them text examples of the grammar types under study, so they could see how they function. I explained I had attempted to integrate grammatical phenomena in the text on several occasions, but had often met with great difficulties, because the grammatical phenomenon did not appear in the text, or appeared in forms that could not be understood by the students, because they lacked other necessary knowledge. The students then demanded that: "*The teaching of grammar should involve simple phrases, that are easy to understand. When learning subjunctive we shouldn't have to learn endings by rote, but to locate the verbs in the sentences, change their number and mood, and see how the sentence changes*". During the discussion, the students suggested something I had heard before but had never dared to implement, as it required total curriculum restructuring. This suggestion is supported by a theory presented in a British series of books for the teaching of Ancient Greek, composed by the Joint Association of Classical Teachers (J.A.C.T.), based at the University of Cambridge. The series uses simple, "artificial" AG texts that can help the students "acquire an awareness and feeling of the language, not just mechanical knowledge of grammar" (Pigiaki 1997: 65).

The students bombarded me with ideas, steering me towards re-planning the teaching of Grammar, through very short texts, artificially constructed for teaching purposes. Of course, the texts' lack of authenticity would rule out any text-centred activities. When I expressed this reservation, they suggested we should examine the grammatical phenomena in special texts, right after analysing the meaning of the authentic schoolbook text.

Unfortunately, we had no time to implement this planning. It remained a perspective, shaped by the students themselves.

#### **4. Evaluating the process**

The research process was completed with a group semi-structured interview I conducted aiming at collecting additional data, so as to evaluate my teaching and

research. To prepare students for the interview, I asked them to answer the following in their journals: “What did I like most about the AG class this year?”, “What bothered me and ought to be limited or eliminated?”, “What do I propose for the teaching of the initial text and Grammar?”, “What do I propose about class teaching in general?” The following evaluation draws on the transcriptions of these interviews, my own notes / observations, and our reflection on the three cycle process.

### 1. Evaluating the research process

In practical / critical action research, students can be co-researchers; their voice can and should be heard both in class and in school. This research was our initiative; its subject was set by students, and it concerned problems we both faced. I could see they wanted to raise their voice but couldn't. It's worth mentioning that, before the research project, they had been writing their thoughts on AG on the class board! They needed people to talk to and work with, towards a common goal. I utilised my classroom's feeling of trust to begin research as a researcher and facilitator for my student co-researchers. It was positive that I played a central role without excluding the students from the process. In the final interview, they mentioned: *“Through this work we saw that when students discuss, in conjunction with the teacher (when the teacher is responding to the students' suggestions on the class), they can bring about many changes, which are very positive”*. What made it easy for us to work as active partners was our common concern about the same teaching / learning problem, the fact that neither of us had ready answers for the resulting questions, and the student participation framework we developed. In class, I felt the development of Fielding's radical collegiality (1999), since both parties honestly wished to deal with the problem by learning from each other. This was clear for the students: *“It is important that the teacher should learn from her students, as you did, and that the students' thoughts should be expressed, written down, and discussed”* (final interview).

In fact, as the research evolved and the students could see their voice affecting the teaching and learning process, they became increasingly involved in the research and started expressing themselves more freely; note the students who protested about the teaching in the third cycle. This indicates the research was successful. Over time, students did not become bored, nor did they forget to keep their journals, nor did they chat aimlessly during the discussion groups. To the contrary, as time went by I noticed they became deeply involved in the research; they strove to find solutions and reproved peers who had forgotten to bring or fill in their journals. During the third cycle, some groups composed strictly structured reports, like lesson plans: they began with desirable aims, moved on to the teaching material to be used (short, simple, constructed texts) and even included how it would be taught in class. That is, initially their reports contained only observations, but towards the end some reports included solid proposals with defined and substantiated steps.

The student participation framework we developed was also quite successful. Journal writing and group and class discussions provided students with the means to express their voice – their true voice, not that of their teacher. These means are common in students' consultation, as they can build into a habit of reflective dialogue on teaching and learning (McBeath et al. 2003: 28). The framework's greatest achievement is that its development created a cyclical pattern of reflection: first they reflected on their experiences as they wrote, and then they reflected on the journal

entries themselves during group discussions, which in turn provided material for further reflection, and so on (Holly 1984: 7). This gave students the opportunity to participate in the data analysis process, safeguarding the integrity of their voice, which could have been easily altered by a teacher analysing the data on her own (Mitra 2001: 92).

In the final interview, almost all students noted that participation in research enhanced student empowerment. Other benefits revolved around the following:

- Development of metacognitive skills: The students started to understand how and what they learn in this course. This is demonstrated by the frequent construction of educational theory in class.
- Development of critical attitude, demonstrated by various class incidents. For instance, note the students who reacted to the numerous interdisciplinary connections, steering the class towards the teaching of Grammar. Also, during the discussion in class at the end of the second cycle, one student group proposed the use of computers to assist translation, but met with substantiated arguments on the student passivity that such a solution might engender, on knowledge standardisation, on the bombardment of students with information they cannot utilise, on the lack of communication, on the fear of abuse of this tool, etc. Moreover, this criticism did not take place in a sterile context of rejection, but in a context of genuine concern and interest, in an attempt to pose new research questions and with a readiness to try out new suggestions in practice.
- Development of communication skills: Journals allowed students to express themselves in writing, while group discussions enabled and encouraged them to express themselves verbally.
- Development of social skills: For the sake of the research students cooperated, agreed and disagreed, worked as part of a team. In group discussions, they learned to listen to their peers and developed consensus building skills. Listening is the foundation of democratic participation, encouraging inclusiveness and respect.
- Raise of students' self-esteem and confidence: This took place as they saw that their opinions are acknowledged and can form the educational processes in the group and classroom context.

Yet our effort also suffered from important limitations. The students' lack of research experience was such a restriction; they faced difficulties in their reflection. They often reproduced clichés on the subject's value, losing the authenticity of their voice. In other cases, they answered the guiding questions reproducing what we had said in class, without being able to distinguish the two different levels on which they had to function, as students and researchers. Hence I had to keep circulating among the groups, posing questions in order to facilitate the students' reflection, and guiding them back to the research's scope. More specifically, I prompted them to substantiate their arguments, to interpret their observations, to compose action hypotheses, and to pose new questions.

Another difficulty faced by the students regarded their inability to merge similar or contrary views. In their reports, they could not record the negotiation of issues by each group, nor could they describe their thoughts collectively. They resorted to the easy solution of presenting the arguments of each member of the team in direct or indirect speech. It took time and effort to help them understand to a certain extent – and only some groups responded – the meaning of synthesis (of arguments, views, and suggestions) and how it can be achieved.

Time was another important limitation. Today, students' time is precious, and it is always hard to find time for extra-curricular activities, which do not transfer exams-oriented knowledge. But reflection takes time...

## 2. Evaluating the teaching innovations

The research conducted gave new perspectives to the teaching of AG in a particular educational context. The subject's teaching was enriched by our turn towards the AG text and the world that created it (its context), interdisciplinary and intertextual connections, and the modifications of the translation process. Moreover, our focus on the AG text brought forward the issue of the text's "reading". In such a favourable climate of communication and research, reading was considered a social process which forms and optimises the relationships between students and teacher, among students, between writers and readers (Egan-Robertson & Willett 1998: 50), and between the students and the ancient world. Had we had more time and had the teaching continued, it would have been very interesting to look at the teaching of Grammar through the text, and at how we could examine linguistic phenomena as agents of meaning in the AG text.

The learning process changed to a great extent. Where the students had been dealing with "dead" words, they were now focusing on texts, meanings, interpretations. They linked these texts to their life, their time, their experience; texts came to life and started concerning them. Despite certain difficulties, it seemed that texts started to charm them. They came to understand the function of culture (not just ancient but also contemporary, their own culture), language, and linguistic evolution, through activities that created meaning for the students. They said: "*AG is alive because it is embedded in our language and culture*" (final interview). They understood the meaning of text and its function, and approached its grammar. In the final interview, one student said: "*When we stopped looking at the text word for word to translate it, it became more real. We are not interested in words: one word means something, another word means something else. That's not a text; it is a mere compilation of words. It might be of use to a machine that needs to know the meaning of each word. We are interested only in the meaning of the text*". This observation refers us to a first understanding of textuality and its defining criteria, which form basic research parameters in the context of the text-centred approach to language teaching. Once more, students "discovered" educational theory.

## 5. Concluding comments

This article described a small-scale research project (regarding its duration and participants), which raised important political and social issues: How does school change when we reinforce the voice of students who have long been mere recipients

of the educational process, unable to influence it? Does this endanger or promote the school's democratic character? Does student participation in research modify school hierarchy?

As a teacher, I gained by this research process, because I saw what my students wanted, what they found creative, pleasant and useful, and enriched my teaching with their perspective. They helped me find ways to relate their adolescent concerns and worries to the Ancient Greek world and its literature. I realised the students have a lot to say, and can offer many suggestions, as long as we trust them and give them the opportunity to first establish and express their ideas and then share them with us.

In Shannon's words, the most important benefit was our collective effort: "to develop democratically means to move ourselves and our students from our original position of seeing ourselves as objects, who believe that economics, politics and schooling happen to us, to a new position of seeing ourselves as subjects, who have the right, ability and responsibility to participate in the decision making that affects our lives" (Shannon 1993: 91).

## References

### *Texts in English*

Andrusyszyn, M. & Davie, L. (1997). Facilitating Reflection through Interactive Journal Writing in an Online Graduate Course: A Qualitative Study. *Journal of Distance Education*, 12 (1), retrieved February 2007 from <http://cade.athabascau.ca/vol12.1/andruszyndavie.html>

Atweh, B., Christensen, C. & Dornan, L. (1998). Students as action researchers: Partnerships for social justice. In B. Atweh, S. Kemmis & P. Weeks (Eds.) *Action research in practice: Partnerships for social justice in education*. London and New York: Routledge.

Atweh, B., Kemmis, S. & Weeks, P. (Eds.) (1998). *Action research in practice: Partnerships for social justice in education*. London and New York: Routledge.

Carr, W. & Kemmis, S. (1986). *Becoming Critical: education, knowledge and action research*. Basingstoke: Falmer Press.

Carr, W. (1994). Whatever Happened to Action Research. *Educational Action Research*, 2 (3), 427-436.

Cope, B. & Kalantzis, M. (Eds.) (2000). *Multiliteracies: Literacy learning and the design of social futures*. London and New York: Routledge.

Dagley, V. (2004). Making the Invisible Visible: a methodological and a substantive issue. *Educational Action Research*, 12 (4), 613-630.

Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York: The Free Press.

Dewey, J. (1944). *Experience and education*. New York: The Macmillan Company.

Egan-Robertson, A. & Bloome, D. (Eds.) (1998). *Students as researchers of culture and language in their own communities*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Egan-Robertson, A. & Willett, J. (1998). *Students as ethnographers, thinking and doing ethnography: A bibliographic essay*. In A. Egan-Robertson & D. Bloome (Eds.). *Students as researchers of culture and language in their own communities*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Elliott, J. (1991). *Action research for educational change*. Milton Keynes and Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Elliott, J. (1993). *The Relationship Between "Understanding" and "Developing" Teachers' Thinking*. In Elliott, J. (Ed) *Reconstructing Teacher Education*. Teacher Development, London: The Falmer Press, 193-207.

Elliott, J. (Ed) (1993). *Reconstructing Teacher Education*. Teacher Development. London: The Falmer Press.

Fielding, M. (1999). *Radical Collegiality: affirming teaching as an inclusive professional practice*. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 26 (2), 1-34.

Fielding, M. (2001). *Students as radical agents of change*. *Journal of Educational Change*, 2, 123-141.

Fielding, M. (2004). *Transformative approaches to student voice: theoretical underpinnings, recalcitrant realities*. *British Educational Research Journal*, 30 (2), 295-311.

Flutter, J. & Rudduck, J. (2004). *Consulting Pupils. What's in it for schools?* London: Routledge Falmer.

Fulwiler, T. (Ed.) (1987). *The journal book*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton / Cook Publishers.

Graybeal, J. (1987). *The team journal*. In T. Fulwiler (Ed.) *The journal book*, Portsmouth (pp. 306-311). NH: Boynton / Cook Publishers.

Grundy, S. (1987). *Curriculum : Product or Praxis ?* London - New York & Philadelphia: The Falmer Press.

Hollingsworth, S. & Sockett, H. (Eds.) (1994). *Teacher Research and Educational Reform, Ninety - third Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*. Chicago: NSSE & University of Chicago Press.

Holly, M. L. (1984). *Keeping a personal-professional journal*. Victoria: Deakin University Press.



Johnassen, D. (1991). Evaluating constructivist learning, *Educational Technology*, 31 (9), 28-33.

Kerr, D., Lines, A., Blenkinsop, S. & Schagen, I. (2002). *Citizenship and Education at age 14: A Summary of the International Findings and Preliminary Results for England*. London: National Foundation for Educational Research.

Kirby, P. (2001). Participatory Research in Schools. *FORUM*, 43 (2), 74-77.

Kress, G. (2000). Multimodality. In B. Cope & M. Kalantzis (Eds.). *Multiliteracies: Literacy learning and the design of social futures*. London and New York: Routledge.

Lincoln, Y. (1993). I and thou: method, voice and roles in research with the silenced. In D. McLaughlin & W.G. Tierney (Eds). *Naming silenced lives: personal narratives and processes of educational change* (pp. 29-47). New York: Routledge.

McBeath, J., Demetriou, H., Rudduck, J. & Myers, K. (2003). *Consulting Pupils – a toolkit for teachers*. Cambridge: Pearson Publishing.

Mezirow, J. & associates (Eds.) (1990). *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (1990). How critical reflection triggers transformative learning. In J. Mezirow & associates (Eds.). *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood* (pp. 1-20). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass 1-20.

Mitra, D. (2001). Opening the Floodgates: giving students a voice in school reform. *FORUM*, 43 (2), 91-94.

Roderick, J.A. (1986). Dialogue writing: context for reflecting on self as teacher and researcher. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 1 (4), 305-315.

Shannon, P. (1993). Developing Democratic Voices. *The Reading Teacher*, 47 (2), 86-94.

Stenhouse, L. (1975). *An introduction to curriculum research and development*. Oxford: Heinemann.

The ESRC Network Project Newsletter (2001). No1, retrieved February 2007 from [www.consultingpupils.co.uk/Newsletter.pdf](http://www.consultingpupils.co.uk/Newsletter.pdf)

Zeichner, K. (1996). Teachers as reflective practitioners and the democratization of school reform. In K. Zeichner, S. Melnick & M.L. Gomez (Eds.). *Currents of reform in preservice teacher education* (pp. 199-214). New York: Teachers College Press.

Zeichner, K. M. (1994). Personal Renewal and Social Construction through Teacher Research. In Sandra Hollingsworth & Hugh Sockett (Eds.). *Teacher Research and Educational Reform, Ninety - third Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education* (pp. 66-84). Chicago: NSSE & University of Chicago Press.

Zeichner, K., Melnick, S. & Gomez, M.L. (Eds.) (1996). *Currents of reform in preservice teacher education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

### *Texts in Greek*

Bernstein, B. (1991). Codes, modalities and the process of cultural reproduction – A model. In *Readings from class, codes and control*. Introduction, translation and comments: Iosif Solomon. Athens: Alexandria.

Georgakopoulou, A. & Goutsos, D. (1999). *Text and communication*. Athens: Ellinika Grammata.

Pigiaki, P. (1997). Teaching Ancient Greek in high school: A mythology and a suggestion. *Nea Paideia*, 84.

Tsafos, V. (2004). *Teaching Ancient Greek literature and language*. Athens: Metahmio.

### *Websites*

[www.funderstanding.com/constructivism.cfm](http://www.funderstanding.com/constructivism.cfm)

[www.consulting\\_pupils.co.uk/index.html](http://www.consulting_pupils.co.uk/index.html)