



# Penetrating the Penguin Wall of Black: Testing theories from PGCE research on how to approach the teaching of KS5 Classical Civilisation

by Rebecca Jones

## Part II: Practice

This article is the second instalment of an exploration into teaching strategies in KS5 Classical Civilisation that started as a research project during the PGCE in 2015. I was particularly interested in determining what might be the most successful ways to approach the teaching of classical literature units. Many of the teachers and students I had spoken to expressed real concern about the volume of text to be covered and the amount of information for students to recall. Following the research I identified a number of ‘theories’ about how these challenges might be tackled and teaching strategies to address them, which I subsequently tested out in my first year of teaching. Below I recap the theories, explain the teaching strategies and activities that were trialled, and share my impressions of how and whether these worked in practice. Although many teachers will be familiar with these approaches, I hope that sharing the experience of trialling these in combination and the subsequent results may provoke consideration or re-consideration. The theories and approaches were explored across two different classes of A Level students (approximately equal numbers of male and female) studying *Iliad* (AS- 6 students) and Greek Tragedy (A2- 5 students) at an independent school for boarders and day pupils aged 13-18.

## Theory 1: Set up students for independent learning

The theory: *The beginning of the course presents an opportunity to ‘train’ students to read and analyse texts critically, and to enable and encourage more independent discovery and learning, thus discouraging over-dependency on the teacher throughout the course.*

In deciding how to approach the beginning of the course, I quickly realised that there were four key things to be considered before plunging into textual analysis. Firstly, the relatively alien nature of classical literature means that context setting is absolutely critical, not least because it can nip in the bud the sort of misinterpretation on the part of students that the research had highlighted as particular to the study of classical texts (e.g. confusing classical heroes with modern-day ‘super-heroes’ with ‘super-powers’). To address this, in teaching the *Iliad* I decided to pretend that students had no knowledge of epic poetry at GCSE (even though the majority had studied the *Odyssey*) and go back to the most basic questions of what epic poetry is, its characteristics and what a hero is, and guide the students to AS Level responses. This revealed any misconceptions immediately, which could then start to be adjusted in discussion before opening the text, and then reiterated once the text was being explored.

Secondly, I chose to make the transfer of contextual information as interactive as possible. I utilised the initial episodes of the audio recordings of ‘War with Troy’, not only to convey the story before the *Iliad* begins, but as a vehicle to highlight and discuss the oral nature of this poetry, the use of epithets, similes and repetition. This seemed to be an engaging way of delivering context and introducing narrative techniques. A similar exercise was conducted to explore perceptions of Greek drama and tragedy with A2 students. This again was an opportunity to introduce the context for drama within the religious and competitive Festival of the Great Dionysia, the peculiarities of staging, actors, and masks and the Chorus. Small excerpts from Sir Peter Hall’s staging of *Agamemnon* (available online) were used to bring Greek drama to life and stimulate discussion. Students were asked to discuss the differences between the experiences of the audience viewing modern versus ancient drama. Tapping into their own experiences made the similarities and differences both relatable and starkly contrasting in equal measure. The use of video and audio materials brought the genre to life and highlighted the point that these were originally plays to watch and poetry to listen to and not read in a classroom setting.

Thirdly, students were given a simple plot outline of the entire work within the first few weeks of the course. If students could see ‘where the story is going’ they

found it much easier to spot and understand the wider themes and their significance as they arose, as opposed to employing a gradual 'reveal'. For instance, if students know that in the end Hector dies and his body is grossly mistreated by Achilles, contrasting examples of proper treatment of dead bodies earlier in the epic, such as Sarpedon's and Patroclus', can be more meaningfully considered and highlighted throughout rather than expecting students to piece this together at the back end of the course. For tragedy, I found it helpful to give students the 'plot on a page' within the first few lessons of studying a new play. As their understanding and confidence grew, they were expected to complete one of these or (by the time we came to study the third play) create it from scratch themselves. Enabling students to view the full play (where available) before any reading or analysis accelerated dramatically their understanding of plot and character and gave them greater ability to spot and analyse themes. Where films or performances were not available, a speed-read of the entire play across a double lesson produced a similar effect. It occurred to me that as teachers we would find it incredibly challenging to analyse texts without the full picture, so too for students!

Finally, another facet to context setting operates on a more administrative, but in my view, essential level. Giving the students a general overview of the course, what books or plays they will be required to 'know', what themes they will be expected to write about and in what format they will be examined are genuine concerns for some students who are embarking on their first A Level course. Providing direction by being open and clear with this information not only assures them, it also makes them consider early on whether they have made the right choice of course for them.

Only when this material had been covered (in around two weeks at four lessons per week) did the actual reading and analysis begin. The approach here was to take the opening section of a play or book and for the teacher to demonstrate analysis and introduce themes in some detail. As a teacher of English had advised me during the initial research: 'the teacher does it for them, with them, then they do it by themselves - this should all happen in one lesson'. For example, the first 200 lines of the *Medea*, before Medea appears on stage, were used

to discuss and highlight the themes that emerge, the character of Medea and how the playwright creates drama and tension. Students were encouraged to take up the baton of analysis throughout this process with the teacher as prompt, culminating in a short essay that effectively asked them to play back aspects of our discussion in their own words targeted at a particular question. In other words, the whole course 'process' is performed in microcosmic form using a limited amount of text within the first three weeks.

The English teacher had also warned me that the practicalities of this approach require a certain degree of bravery in terms of dedicating what appears to be a disproportionate amount of time to the first book of an epic poem, or the first play of a set of tragedies. But I learned that if students could be 'trained' to analyse character, familiarise themselves with the key themes, and express their own opinions in written form early on, then the rest of the course and the reading matter could be taken at an accelerating pace with the students taking on more analysis outside the classroom. For example, eight weeks were spent studying our first play, the *Medea*, but the last of the four texts, *Hippolytus*, could be covered in only four weeks as the students conducted much more of their own analysis using the methods they had learned over the course.

In conclusion, I found it hugely helpful to 'train' students in critical analysis from the very beginning of the course and this enabled a good degree of independent learning. However, this was only one element for consideration. When embarking on the course, setting the classical context, delivering background in an engaging way, providing a good overview of plot and themes up front and being clear on the direction that study will take, the approach to learning expected of the students and its end goal are all of vital importance.

## Theory 2: Get students reading outside lessons

The theory: *A combination of the volume of text to be covered and the time required to practise argument and writing requires that students read the text independently outside lessons. This is not to say that texts should not be read in lessons at*

*all, just that a linear, line by line read through is not practical or desirable in my view.*

Despite being warned throughout the research phase that students would 'just not read the text on their own', a plan was put in place to gradually increase the amount of text that students read outside the classroom environment. Having 'trained' the students in analysis using the first book of a poem or section of a play, I began to set 'reading' as homework. However, students were rarely expected just to read. Students had to be incentivised to read by the knowledge that their understanding would be checked. This took a number of different forms, the most typical being a 'quiz' on what had been set for reading in the previous lesson. Students who had not done their reading homework could identify for themselves quickly that this work needed to be done and areas of misunderstanding became apparent as we discussed answers.

In addition, students were issued with a simple workbook at the beginning of the year containing a page to write down the plot of each book of the *Iliad*, for example, a section for character profiles and a simile grid. They were expected to keep these up to date as the course progressed (an activity that was also set as homework or as catch-up during the occasional late afternoon lesson) and workbooks were checked at regular intervals.

Reading could also be targeted at a particular thematic question, piece of character analysis or the requirement to paraphrase different characters' arguments. Students might be asked to read and then transform a section of the poem into a script for performance, which was then rehearsed and performed in lesson. Patroclus' funeral was ripe territory for this, complete with props from a three year old's toy farmyard set. As the students became more expert at reading and analysis, they were expected to take on entire sections of a book of the *Iliad* and run an analysis session with the class, sitting in the teacher's chair, of course. Book 22 of the *Iliad* seemed to lend itself well to this sort of division with six students. The teacher's role therefore became one of facilitator and prompt.

The facility to edit shared documents in Google Drive and Classroom enabled me to set reading and analysis online as part of 'reading' homework. I created a question template of the particular



episode from the poem, scene or characters from the play for analysis, allocated a student to each section and monitored progress either during the lesson or next day following a homework session. Seeing their efforts shared on screen with their fellow students proved highly engaging and motivating for students (once they had got over the novelty of posting rude words up for all to see and deleting each other's work-easily retrievable, but momentarily shocking for the dedicated student!). They added their own pictures to bring the document to life, changed the formatting and seemed to enjoy the variety of spending the occasional lesson in the IT room 'googling Creon/Oedipus/Jocasta' or whoever we were analysing that day. Of course, those who did not contribute to this document in homework tasks were immediately exposed and appropriately castigated by the group: there was little I needed to add to this!

This approach meant that reading, combined with analysis outside the classroom, could be gradually built up over the course and allowed lessons to be focused on particular pieces of the text that I felt needed more explanation, attention or context-setting from the teacher. I often chose to isolate these from the text by reproducing them on their own piece of A4 or A3 paper to make them stand out in importance and leave room for copious notes around the edges (rather than in the margins of a Penguin book- that student default for 'note-taking'). Alternatively, if we were doing a piece of character analysis I might provide the students with a grid of adjectives appropriate to the character in this scene and ask them to provide those quotes from the text that demonstrated each characteristic. This helped students who were less able to gradually translate speech into adjectival behavioural descriptors for themselves, whilst widening their vocabulary and showing them what sort of analysis to aim for. This also meant that the student who might not keep on top of their workbook would still have the key pieces of information required to begin to construct narrative and argument.

Finally, we did do some linear reading in class. However, we rarely missed the opportunity to stage the reading in some way in order to make it memorable and enjoyable for the students reading and

those following. One student delivered Medea's wails of despair (before she comes on stage) sitting on a chair in the corner of the classroom facing the back wall to represent 'off-stage'. Medea's triumphant exit scene was memorably delivered, but this time with the student facing the class and standing on a desk on high. Similarly, students would stand and deliver their readings of Homer holding a 'staff' (a long window-opening pole) to represent the bard's stance as he put forth at a feast.

I concluded that in order for reading outside the classroom to be effective it should be seen more broadly than just 'setting reading for homework'. The teacher needs to guide students in what to look for when they read, but also create incentives, frameworks and tasks that transfer the act of reading itself into tangible outputs and move them towards analysis. This then allows the most critical sections of the text to get extra time for guided analysis and discussion in class.

### Theory 3: Vary the teaching methods and time them appropriately

The theory: *Not only should a range of teaching methodologies be employed to appeal to different learning styles and abilities, but getting the balance right between teacher-led and student-led activities is an important consideration within that. When considering which activities to employ, the appropriateness of their timing is also critical amongst sixth form students who feel the great pressure of assessment.*

Observations during the initial research phase suggested that students were most engaged when visual, aural or kinaesthetic techniques were interspersed with a more traditional approach to textual analysis (i.e. reading and discussing gobbits of texts and making notes or answering questions on a worksheet). In addition to the techniques discussed above, I trialled a number of other teaching ideas, that I had observed during the PGCE, in order to appeal to different learning styles and abilities.

#### *Visual techniques*

In combination with keeping record of similes on a simile grid, students were briefed to present a simile each against the

backdrop of an appropriate visual image in PowerPoint. These were then discussed, collated and circulated. I used two different films of the *Iliad* (*Troy* and *Helen of Troy*) to do scene vs. text comparisons of Paris and Menelaus' duel and Hector's death respectively. A read-through of the entire play *Oedipus the King* was accompanied on the class projector screen by a visual backdrop of pictures of characters and setting, along with their key quotes, used as a summary of the storyline scene by scene for those following the text (when they were not reading/performing). This was then circulated as prompt material for them to prepare the 'plot on a page' as homework. Finally, students were asked to draw a scene each from Achilles' shield on a large piece of wall-display paper. Not only did this prove 'therapeutic', as the students put it, but stood out as memorable for sixth form students who are rarely asked to get their set of colouring pens out!

One of the most useful visual prompts that was developed was a classroom notice-board dedicated to the concept of the Homeric hero. At the beginning of the text we started with just an image of the hero and bare space. As heroic attributes emerged from the text we annotated these onto the wall display until we had a whole gamut of attributes. Students would frequently look to this as a reference when we were discussing whether certain characters' behaviour was heroic or otherwise. This remains a permanent display in the classroom and is proving a valuable resource across all year groups studying Homer.

#### *Kinaesthetic techniques*

Male students in particular enjoyed the opportunity for dramatic re-enactment. In addition to the scripting and performance of certain scenes as mentioned above, students prepared freeze frames of the various killing scenes in *Iliad* Book 4 using some basic props (window-opening poles again as spears/swords, red tissue paper and red feathers for blood). Not only was this an extremely fun exercise for the students (the various contorted positions and death-throw expressions being particularly amusing), but the images were then displayed on the classroom wall as a permanent visual reference and reminder.

I also experimented with a technique known as 'hot-seating' where students

play the role of one of the characters and are questioned about their feelings, motivations and decisions. Paris and Helen were put ‘in the hot-seat’ at the end of *Iliad* Book 3, complete with leopard skin waistcoat, helmet and a veil (an old net curtain). Paris in particular got quite a vicious ‘roasting’, as the students termed it. So realistic was this in fact that the teacher in the room next door thought that the student was getting a serious dressing down for bad behaviour!

I found that the timing of more visual or kinaesthetic activities became less of a concern than I had originally thought. If a variety of techniques are regularly used, (as opposed to being rolled out for special occasions when one is bored of traditional textual analysis), then they become the norm and students do not judge them as frivolous or lacking in usefulness, even if they are employed close to exam time. The act of doing something physical or preparing something visual is more often than not highly engaging for learners and a welcome relief from timed essay writing and note-taking.

Many of these activities take the focus away from the teacher and expect the students to lead, to engage and to interact with each other using the text as stimulation, which proved popular. This kind of student-led thinking was extended into more traditional textual analysis by using a ‘pair and share’ approach, something that I employed frequently. However, I observed that varying the approach seemed to have benefits beyond student engagement and self-reliance. The techniques themselves started to become visual ‘memory markers’ for the students. They would recall a particular scene by the method we had used to explore it: ‘that’s what happened when student x was standing on the desk’, ‘that’s the point we made when we googled Jocasta’, ‘that’s the one where we filled out all the boxes’. Memorability through technique becomes a powerful side-benefit of technique variation.

## Theory 4: Show students what a good essay is and encourage argument

The theory: *The teacher of Classical Civilisation needs to consider how the way we*

*handle the reading of the text can support the development of skills that achieve an end of goal of essay writing. Whilst students are tested on their recall of the texts to some degree, the majority of marks at this level are awarded for the quality of written communication in terms of developing a consistent argument and point of view supported by the text. This is the end goal of the reading and should be incorporated in the teaching strategy throughout.*

The inspiration for this theory came from an article I had read by Simon Tombs published in JACT in 1997. Tombs identified several areas that students of Classical Civilisation struggle with in their essay writing: incorporating primary evidence from the text, failing to focus on the specifics of the question and an inability to develop strands of argument. He concluded with a number of suggestions to address this, some of which I trialled in this first year of teaching. I also employed some common techniques such as group essay planning, question deconstruction and writing outside the traditional essay style (e.g. responding to a journal article) but below I focus on two specific strategies that I found improved students’ writing considerably across the ability range.

My observation was that many students embarking on an A Level course have little conception of what a ‘good’ essay actually looks like. For some writing an essay is a thing of dread: to them it means the compulsion to produce a large quantity of words that demonstrate that you understand the text, which is why many students fall into the trap of retelling the story of a text rather than answering the question and arguing for their point of view with support from the text.

As a first step towards changing these perceptions I found it invaluable to train students in how to write an ideal introduction to an essay. I had been informed by an examiner of how critical it is for students to set out their argument well in the introductory paragraph and how greatly this influences the examiner’s evaluation of the level of mark the student will be awarded. To improve the quality of their essay introductions I employed the following approach. After receiving feedback on their very first essay submission, students were given and asked to familiarise themselves with the examination board’s essay mark scheme level framework. They then identified what made the key difference between a

mid-level and a top-level answer - i.e. a clear and consistent argument maintained throughout the essay that answers the specifics of the question. I then presented them with a different essay title and four different essay introductions to the same question (made up by me but billed as taken from students’ essays) and asked them to give each of them a level. They also had to give the author pointers for improvement. Students quickly began to register for themselves what was required in the introduction. Immediately after this, I asked them to re-write the introduction to the essay that they had just written based on this new information. The introductions were then read out and critiqued by the rest of the class. This approach was then extended (on a separate occasion) to students marking each other’s entire essays and giving feedback. The essays were counter-marked by me in advance for comparison. This provided an ideal opportunity for students to learn writing strategies and get ideas from each other, as well as being shown what a good essay looks like.

Once students had a clear idea of how to answer the question and set out an argument in their introduction the second step was for them to be given an essay structure outline. This was used to write full essays at home, but we frequently wrote truncated essay plans in lessons that required them to write a full introduction, the three or four main points of their argument in bullet points with three examples from the text to support each, a counter argument point and a conclusion. This structure, although quite prescriptive, appeared to make essays feel less daunting, more directed and more achievable to write for those who struggled to write a lot, but also helped to focus the writing of those who could write at length but needed to bring greater precision and structure to their argument. I also developed model examples and a structure for answering 10-mark questions that students responded to with similar results.

## Beyond the ‘theories’

But successful essay writing does not just come from having a framework to write to and an idea of what ‘good’ looks like, although it certainly helps. Of course,

students do need to be able to recall the plot and characters of the text correctly, some strategies for which have been discussed above. But fundamentally, students need to be encouraged and given constant opportunity to argue about the text by some means in every single lesson. It seems to me that if the student is to be judged on the quality of their written argument then one of the primary jobs of the teacher is to provoke and facilitate argument about the text. The teacher needs to create an environment where the text and our response to it is open to constant questioning, but also where each student's response is valued and encouraged to develop. This demands that the teacher is clear on precisely the issues she wants to explore in each lesson and knows the right questions to get the students there. Issues and questions also need to link across lessons. For example, in studying *Iliad* Book 16 into Book 18: "How do we feel about Achilles' reaction

to Patroclus' death now we know it was prophesied to him? Now you know this, do you still feel the same person is responsible for his death as you argued last lesson when we reviewed Book 16?" This is probably one of the hardest (and most rewarding) things to get right, especially when teaching a text for the first time, as the teacher herself is still getting familiar with the intricacies of the text. This continues to be an area which I constantly refine, both in terms of approach and content.

As for the theories and approaches that were trialled there is little that I would change and much more that the process has made me discover. Much of their power comes from using all of these approaches in combination. Student feedback and results were very positive, with one student achieving more than two grades above prediction when starting the course. On leaving he wrote: 'It has all been great FUN and really interesting,

which is the best combination'. The teaching strategies could have no greater endorsement than this.

With very special thanks to my mentor on the PGCE course, the incredibly inspirational Gillian Mead, who generously gave to me many of these teaching ideas to play with.

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