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Charles Darwin University

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### Building learning communities and cultural identity

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## **Greek language learning in Australia's Northern Territory: Building learning communities and cultural identity**

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In this paper we provide an evaluative description and report of the various aspects of teaching and learning Greek as a heritage and/or foreign language in the Northern Territory of Australia. Initially, we focus on the importance of the formation of dynamic learning communities through interdisciplinary collaboration. The main purpose of Charles Darwin University's *Greek In-Country Study Program* is to support the learning of Greek language and culture through language lessons as well as concurrent cultural activities that are delivered while students are in Greece. After thirteen years of successful implementation of the program, the purpose of this report is to highlight the learning activities that have been completed over these years through a discussion of the research outcomes of the students' experiences that we believe will underscore the important roles that language, literature, and culture play in the strengthening of one's Greek identity while living within Australia. Within this framework, basic principles of design and the use of cross-university teaching and learning programs for the Greek language are presented, as well as foregrounding the advantages of current information technology for instructional purposes and, in particular, the maintenance, and perhaps even revival of heritage languages as well as reinforcing their contributions to the role of education in the diaspora.

### **Introduction**

In this paper, we report on a program initiative, namely Charles Darwin University's *Greek In-Country Study Program* and describe ongoing refinements to that program as well as what data will be gathered to evaluate its effectiveness as a context for the creation of ongoing dynamic learning communities through interdisciplinary collaboration in two specific universities, one in Greece (Aegean University) and the other in the Northern Territory, Australia (Charles Darwin University).

The present study is part of a series of efforts and initiatives which are intended to identify and describe the different approaches to teaching the Greek language as a heritage language (Valdes, 2001; Aravossitas & Oikonomakou, 2018; 2020), and/or as a foreign language within the context of community learning (Clyde & Fernandez, 2008) as well as the academic synergy of various educational providers (Skourtou, 2002). The strength of Greek language education in general (Damanakis, 2007), and in Australia in particular, can be supported by the following: (a) the strengthening of relationships between the diasporic communities and the country of the language of origin (Oikonomakou et al., 2018); (b) the teamwork among the language learning communities involved within a

collaborative framework among the various tertiary institutions and researchers, thus enabling both a synchronistic and asynchronistic investigation of the dynamic phenomenon of migration (Panagiotopoulou, Rosen, Kirsch & Chatzidaki, 2019; Frazis, Kourtis-Kazoullis, Papantonakis & Oikononakou, 2019); and (c), the creation of a digital environment for the teaching of the language that enables an evaluation of new digital tools with the goal of meeting the educational needs of students (Kourtis-Kazoullis, Papantonakis & Frazis, 2013). There is also the parallel goal of processing the research findings of conferences and of other research activities as to the efficacy of initiatives that have already taken place (CDU, 2016; Carment, et al., 2019; Frazis, et al., 2021).

From all the interventions that have been applied to date by the Charles Darwin University program, what is initially selected for discussion in this paper, is the contribution made by the Greek In-Country Study Program. Our rationale for this includes the following reasons: first, because of its long-term existence, this program succeeded in laying the foundation for the development of inter-university collaboration. It contributed specifically to the teaching and learning of the Greek language in a “live” manner through fostering connections with students who are using the Greek language in an authentic context in the country of origin (CDU, 2016; Frazis et al., 2019). Second, emphasis is also given to identified strengths of long-distance learning via the information and communication technology (ICT) tools drawn on for the teaching and learning of the language. In these ways, our intention is to demonstrate that cross-cultural communication when contextualised within the group dynamic of online learning communities, can contribute effectively in promoting language learning as well as to the strengthening of cultural identity (Cummins, 2001) of the members of a migrant community.

## **Learning on the move: The Greek In-Country Study Program**

### **A brief background of the activities**

Thoughts for the materialisation of an educational program which has as its objective the teaching of Greek language and culture, and which would promote cross-academic collaboration both in and outside of Greece, came to fruition in 2007 when the first draft of a plan for such a collaborative initiative was signed by the Aegean University in Greece, and Charles Darwin University in Australia (CDU, 2016). This was followed one year later at the School of Humanities of the Aegean University in Rhodes, by the signing of a memorandum of understanding between these two institutions. The agreement placed at its epicentre the strengthening of collaboration among the educational institutions involved, including the primary goals of promoting new teaching/learning modes, incorporating as core to the initiative, updated technological platforms and tools, and the reinforcement of Greek language education (Damanakis, 2007) in the diaspora.

One of the fruits of this labour was the use of an electronic environment, *Logou Hari* which operates as a platform (Kourtis-Kazoullis et al., 2013) for collaborative engagement among members of the two universities at the time, namely, the Aegean University and Charles Darwin University. Those continuously involved with the creation and monitoring

of the Greek In-Country Study Program (CDU, 2016) included members of the Department of Primary Education at the Aegean University who offered their academic expertise and continued to be supportive of the Greek background and non-Greek background students in their work. In 2014, with a similar orientation and philosophy, a memorandum of understanding was signed with the University of Macedonia in Greece. Within the framework of this agreement were included interdisciplinary collaboration, and an international inaugural conference initiated by Charles Darwin University, and continued at the Aegean University and the University of Macedonia (Carment et al., 2019).

The aim of the two conferences (held in 2017 and 2019) which were located across the three universities, was the establishment of academic initiatives that included the following main topics: “The Greek Diaspora,” as well as an interchange of ideas about perceptions of Greek language education (Frazis et al., 2019). It is noteworthy that apart from the ongoing assistance from the tertiary institutions primarily involved in improving the quality of the ongoing initiative, was the articulation of contributions to this effort from various potential providers such as Greek and other cultural associations, the inclusion and role(s) of private donors, as well as an articulation of the roles of primary and secondary education providers who embrace the Greek In-Country Study Program (CDU, 2016), and to offer their mentoring services to Charles Darwin University.

The onset and rapid escalation of the Covid-18 pandemic in 2020 resulted in the suspension of activities which had been programmed to take place in Greece during that same year. However, the program was offered for online delivery both in 2020 and 2021. As one early outcome, the creation of an active network of colleagues in several universities led to the publication of the first collective/collaborative volume (Carment et al., 2019), the central topic of which was the multi-level activity among the Greek communities in the Northern Territory of Australia, as well as of other centres where the Greek presence has been evident, and remains strong, and has even shown growth as a consequence of the economic crisis that broke out in Greece since 2010 onwards. The publication of the first volume, *Perspectives on the Hellenic diaspora* (Carment, et al., 2019) was financed by the Government of the Northern Territory and the Charles Darwin Foundation. The second collective volume published in 2021, *Perspectives on the Hellenic diaspora Volume 2* (Frazis et al., 2021) was also financed by the Government of the Northern Territory. Its central topic is migration from an interdisciplinary perspective and, as such, it contains studies of the phenomenon of migration through the lens of historical, cultural, community, and ethnographic orientations and methodologies.

### **Aims and philosophies of the program**

The Greek In-Country Study Program may be taken as an elective within a number of awards at CDU; namely, Diploma of Arts, Bachelor of Arts, and Bachelor of Education. Two essential goals of the Greek In-Country Study Program are the daily use of the Greek language in authentic communicative environments (Hymes, 1972; Halliday, 1994; Richards, 2006) as well as a critical approach toward the role(s) that a variety of sociocultural contexts play in language use (Fairclough, 1995; Luke, 2012; Frazis et al.,

2019). Participants are given the opportunity for the three-weeks duration of the program to interact with differentiated uses of the language (Halliday, 1994) and, depending on their level of linguistic competency (Council of Europe, 2001) with the language, to use it in a variety of settings. In this effort, they are encouraged by their teachers/mentors throughout the entire three weeks (i.e., the duration of the program) to respond to daily communicative situations in mutual interaction with members of a Greek-speaking population.

Developing familiarity with varied linguistic and cultural stimuli is supported by the goals of the program in its inclusion of a wide variety of multi-level activities (Kourtis-Kazoullis et al., 2013) which occur naturally in the environment in which the language is being developed, and is reflected in a natural way, as well as in the development of a linguistic and cultural identity that emerges and develops at various stages of the journey. Entry to a Greek reality and identity is also pursued through students' productions of short films that reflect their specific interests and inclinations. In the course of these productions, the research (i.e., gathering of materials), and the creation of multi-modal texts, which are characterised by the co-functioning of various audio-visual modes) take place.

Three basic aims of the program were identified, namely, (a) the embodiment of new technological tools in language teaching from a critical perspective (Luke, 2012), as well as in the teaching and learning of Greek as a heritage language (Valdes, 2001; Aravossitas & Oikonomakou, 2020), and/or as a second (in this case, as a foreign) language; (b) the acquisition and/or reinforcement of academic skills as applied to language learning and development; and (c) the strengthening of identity (Cummins, 2000; 2001) through language among members of the specific learning community. The students are encouraged to behave as researchers in the field, using the target language at all the developmental stages of the task and making use of all that is available in their daily experiences. In this way, their critical understanding of the texts as well as their oral language use develops systematically, reflectively, and naturally, as an outcome of their daily usage of the language while also simultaneously reflecting on that usage from a researcher's perspective.

Choice of topic on the other hand, is drawn from a wide range of modules which consist of historic, ethnographic, linguistic and cultural sources that represent different regions of the country. The program courses (derived from Kalymnos, Crete, Asia Minor, and even Macedonia) provide the fuel for the localised research and the collection of information per region (CDU, 2016), with the use of a variety of research tools depending on the situation for which they are best suited (e.g., one-on-one interviews, questionnaires, and use of digital modes among others) for the processing and evaluation of the research data which will lead to authentic multimodal texts (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Luke, 2012). Students are asked to utilise various resources through the Internet. Among resources they are most likely to draw on are linguistic corpora, and instructional materials drawn from Internet sites that focus on language teaching. Students are already trained in the use of digital technology applications which offer valuable linguistic aids. Furthermore, as they are already second language and/or heritage language learners, they are also already

familiar with the use of online dictionaries, online interpreters, and other linguistic resources during their own production of oral and written discourse.

This instructional effort which has been organised as a weekly program (for each of all three weeks during which students are in Greece) consists of specific stages and is supported by the teachers/lecturers who guide and advise team members daily onsite while students are in Greece. In concurrent group sessions over the course of the three-week program, students and instructors also engage in an exchange of ideas about the efficacy of various research methods. The local teams in Greece are in constant communication, as are the students themselves. Aside from the face-to-face interactions that are developed during the different stages of the research, learners are also invited to draw ideas from other relevant forms of meaning (CDU, 2016). The mix of learners with different levels of Greek language competence, and a variety of personal, cultural and social characteristics, assists with the systematic interaction and promotes daily interchanges among the members of the learners because of the mix of communicative needs and through the interpersonal relationships that progressively emerge. In this way, the sense of community is cultivated (Skourtou, 2002; Frazis et al., 2019).

Strengthening of identity (Cummins, 2000, 2001) comprises another specific parameter of the expected learning outcomes as, for the most part, the creation of a multimedia production on the topic chosen by the participants is associated not only with the desire to learn the Greek language, or for the improvement of their language, but is also related to the processing of information related to their origins and, potentially, even to the lives of their ancestors. In this way, the students' contact with the language is simultaneously accompanied by a more intimate investigation, which prioritises the negotiation and redefinition of their identity (Ushioda, 2008). The students' own Greek identity becomes apparent to them, especially if they are offspring of mixed marriages, where some confusion in relation to identity may exist, or if their Greek identity has lain dormant (Evangelinou-Yiannakis, 2015).

Within these developments, which form the motive for joining the Greek program and, subsequently, the continuation of similar studies in the diaspora (Damanakis, 2007; Oikonomakou et al., 2018), the role of the direct experience of Greek culture, language, and behavior is shaped and promoted by the country of origin where the language is spoken unhindered by native speakers. The codification engaged in this way, fosters a lived reality and, therefore, a living language, one which is, in essence, a live social and cultural product, and is not only connected with the completion of desired learning outcomes of a language learning program. Rather, it also functions as a reinforcement and revitalisation of heritage languages within the context of contemporary multi-linguistic environments (CDU, 2016; Aravossitas & Oikonomakou, 2018). "In turn, through the unlocking of this previously untapped potential, a contribution is also made to the multi-cultural nature of Australian society" (Evangelinou-Yiannakis, 2015, pp. 186-187).

## **The methodological framework of language teaching**

The Charles Darwin University Greek In-Country Study Program for the teaching of the Greek language embraces the embodiment and creative use of current pedagogical and language-teaching approaches. These choices have yielded fruit with the collaboration of Charles Darwin University and the Aegean University, and especially with the latter's Pedagogical Department, which has a similar academic orientation to that of Charles Darwin University. The long-term experience of the operation of the Greek In-Country Study Program by the two institutions has contributed to their simultaneous amendments of different organisational aspects and to the final shaping of its philosophy (CDU, 2016; Frazis et al., 2019). From the general description of its goals, it is obvious that the epicentre of the program is based on social theories of learning (Vygotsky, 1978), in which knowledge is built upon in stages through social interaction among the members of any given language community functioning in authentic contexts and for authentic purposes.

Based on Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development (1978, p. 86), cognitive change takes place within the context of the use of common cultural tools which are internalised and transformed comprehensibly after the activation of comprehension and the latter's consolidation with previous experience (Bruning et al., 2004). These transformations are favoured in our situation by the dynamic bonding among the students in real-life situations in the country in which they are using the language (i.e., Greek) on a daily basis, through coordinated travel within Greece, as well as in the students' articulation of common experiences. Consequently, new knowledge is gained and codified progressively, always under the guidance of teachers in the context of social reality, the outcome being the product of a collective experience. However, as the participants bring with them a variety of personal attributes and levels of language competency (Council of Europe, 2001), differentiation strategies are applied, as is even one-on-one teaching if considered expedient. The coexistence of teacher-student in the same space enables adequate time for the design of relevant teaching interventions which, in a conventional classroom setting, would have been difficult to plan and even deliver.

A basic component of this pedagogical approach is the emphasis given to the educational dimensions of technology (Skourtou, 2002). A requirement based on the progressive constructivist theory is not only the transfer of a specific amount of previously determined content, but also the creation of favourable circumstances for the development of new knowledge. Consequently, the use of technological tools in the present project functions in a supportive manner on many levels, while also enabling students to expand their potential for learning, activating their previous knowledge from relevant fields of interest, and developing more advanced cognitive functions as these are activated through new social and cultural experiences in the Greek context.

In terms of teaching methodology, the program makes use of elements of theoretical frameworks that guide the teaching of Greek as a second and/or foreign language, as well as theories about learning languages with the aid of ICT tools (Kourtis-Kazoullis et al., 2013). With the aim of developing the academic linguistic proficiency of the learners (Cummins, 2000), the design of activities which reside in the language and its meaning, as

well as in language use, is pursued. As such, the development of critical language awareness (Fairclough, 1992; 1995), supplying assistance for the understanding of incoming information, the development of critical alphabetisation, and the possibility of the use of the target language as a means of expression and identity (Cummins, 2000), are some of the desired learning outcomes. Included also, are the principles of the communicative approach (Hymes, 1972; Richards, 2006) and that of critical literacy (Freire, 1972; Luke, 2012), whilst pursuing the cultivation of the students' social skills within the familiarity of functionally differentiated uses (Halliday, 1994), as well as the promotion of the language as a social practice (Fairclough, 1995).

The cultivation of critical language skills of the students is also achieved through their contact with authentic text genres (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). The selection of texts, and the negotiation of their meaning within the context of the onsite Greek community thereafter, occurs regularly in real time, with the goal of addressing specific socially and geographically oriented needs. In contrast to what usually happens in a conventional classroom, the texts being studied (interviews, maps, recipes, tourist guides, manuals for making things, historical and folkloric archives, literary passages, etc.) connect within the cultural framework of the different locations of the program (Thessaloniki, Vergina, Pella, Mieza, Prespes, Kastoria, etc.). As such, a relationship of experience is cultivated with the world that is experienced through the lived reality (Hymes, 1972; Halliday, 1994) of the students while in Greece. Consequently, that which is sought for the reading and/or writing of texts is not, in the first instance, the typical learning goal for a target language taught elsewhere (i.e., as a foreign language), but in the context of localisation, so that those tools which could ensure the decoding of the meaning in the given circumstances (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) are appropriate for those circumstances. In fact, as the students choose their field of study (e.g., everyday life in Greece, or Alexander the Great, as depicted in the Pella Museum) based on their interests, they activate their previous cultural knowledge, tracking interconnections within their available linguistic repertoire (Cummins, 2001). In this way, depending on their needs and preferences, their education is geared towards useful (to them) multimodal resources.

The assessment of students, as briefly noted previously in this paper, is based on a research project created by the student -- an approach which has already been applied successfully in a variety of educational settings in Greece (Fragoulis & Tsiplakides, 2009; Kourtis-Kazoullis et al., 2013). The choice of method is in harmony with the philosophy of the Greek In-Country Study Program in that it reflects (as do other methods already discussed), a holistic perception of the inherent relationships between language, literacy, and culture. It also favours natural cooperation among members of the groups, and through the research activity, and also contributes to the transformation of previously fixed perceptions and dominative practices (Luke, 2012) that the students may have acquired through prior learning. At the same time, it also offers to the coordinators and/or teachers, opportunities for utilising a framework of formative assessment (Fragoulis & Tsiplakides, 2009) to inform their evaluations of elements of the course itself, as well as the progress and difficulties that were encountered by each student while taking the course.

At the end of the lessons, specifically in the third week, each student member of the community presents one of two videos of short length, completed during their stay in Greece. The second video is delivered at a determined timeframe after the students' return to Australia, as it is likely that its topic is related to their final location/s while on the trip. The whole study, which is published in digital format, is returned to the students and a copy is placed in the archives of the digital works of the Greek In-Country Study Program (CDU, 2016). The presentation of the work itself feeds into an evaluation of the forms and processes involved in the assessment of the students' language development as well as of their critical and digital literacy skills (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993).

Applications such as *Windows Movie Maker*, *Ars4you* and *iMovie* contribute to the creation of original videos based on lived experiences while the students are in the program. In these creations, the students produce as much oral work in roles such as speakers/narrators, as they produce in their written work. The written texts, which frame the authentic audio-visual events also produced by the students, appear with subtitles, providing accompanying information on the topic of the students' research. Interviews which the students may have conducted, are also regularly presented with those Greek-speaking colleagues/volunteers who may have contributed to the development of the research projects. Interview transcripts also make possible the unpacking of different linguistic varieties of the Greek language (Moschonas, 2019) that students might encounter in their research, and with identifying different registers as well as in understanding distinctions (in Greek) between the spoken and written discourse (e.g., such as the use of punctuation and typographical conventions, the use of paralinguistic elements, etc.). During the reflections phase of the project, critical observations by instructors are noted regarding the students' use of basic Greek language structures in context, the functions of a variety of lexical elements, as well as their vocalised processes which are activated in the intonation of various utterances.

Aside from the study of parameters which shape language use (Halliday, 1994), the creation of videos demonstrates the types of interaction students had with local communities and which promote their abilities and emerging interests such as Greek culture and/or language, Greek history, everyday life in Greece, or specific locations in Greece that have caught students' attention. The exchange of ideas for the produced work contributes in this way to the sharpening of critical thinking of the members of a given community on matters of intercultural communication, and extends to a review of ideological positions or prejudices, as well as to the conscientisation of the role of language as a means of reading the world (Freire, 1972; Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Luke, 2012). The critical study of social, cultural, and political realities also has an additional function which is tied to the strengthening of identity of the youth of the diaspora. Language and identity are found in close co-dependency (Oikonomakou et al., 2018; Mizel, 2021, p. 935) and are usually developed around personal narratives (Anderson, Chung & Macleroy, 2018), which either concern the actual individual or family members, and/or the wider community. Thus, for the participants, the choice of studying the Modern Greek language within Greece marks the beginning of a phase of self-redefinition and renegotiation anew of the perceptions they have formed of their identities.

## ICT tools in building cross-institutional learning communities

Within the framework of collaboration between the Department of Primary Education of The University of the Aegean and Charles Darwin University, the electronic platform, *Logou Hari* has been used for many years, although it is no longer active in the program being described in this paper. It included, among other applications, the possibility of collaboration between classes (Skourtou, 2002; Kourtis-Kazoullis et al., 2013). In this platform students and educators were encouraged to work with classes in Greece or in other parts of the world where they could learn Greek as a second or heritage language. The collaboration among classes offered effective ways of learning a target language, given that the application provided in the digital environment was able to exceed traditional pedagogical approaches to instruction and students were actively involved in *using [emphasis added]* the language. In this way, the learning of the language acquired greater meaning, because it was actively established as a means of communication and learned gradually through the various activities recommended by the *Logou Hari* webpage.

*Logou Hari* adopted a collaborative learning approach which brought together students from various universities, making it a worthwhile and useful educational tool for the learning of Greek as a second (Ellis, 1997) and/or heritage language in the diaspora (Aravossitas & Oikonomakou, 2018, 2020). An outcome of the development of this critical collaborative research component (Cummins, 2000, 2001) was the design and use of an electronic environment which combined theory with practice, putting at the epicentre, language teaching with the use of digital technology. Its theoretical framework was based on the *Framework for The Development of Academic Expertise* (Cummins, 2001), as it was amended for the needs of the specific internet space that is, *Logou Hari* platform. Related to this, various forms of literacy and, specifically, poetry, constitute a very vital (indeed, a central) medium for the development of critical literacy skills, and the development of imagination in learners (Egan, 1992).

The planned activities for the learners are focused simultaneously on the following: (a) language; (b) meaning; and (c) language use (Cummins, 2001). The focus on language is aimed at the cultivation of linguistic awareness within formal language settings, as well as on the acquisition of critical language awareness (Fairclough, 1992; Luke, 2012). The focus on meaning includes: (a) the understanding of incoming information; and (b) the development of critical vocabulary. The focus on language use is based on the perception that students will have to use the target language actively as a means of expressing their identity. Furthermore, emphasis is placed on the supply of language aids (Vygotsky, 1978) in the creation of authentic motives for learning a language (Ellis, 1997), and in the development of learners' metalinguistic awareness. The materialisation of those efforts have demonstrated the importance of collaborative critical research in the discovery of more creative ways of learning which, with an axis on language teaching and the role of technology shaping new forms of expression, secures the active participation of the students, regardless of the obstacles related to long-distance learning procedures such as, for example, the absence of physical presence.

Apart from current applications to the learning of Greek as a second and/or heritage language in the diaspora (Oikonomakou, et al., 2018), the electronic environment is used to a high degree for the teaching of literature (Frazis et al., 2019). A basic aim of instructional interventions was the promotion of the functional use of language (Halliday, 1994; Richards, 2006) in tandem with literature, familiarising students with its literal and metaphoric dimensions, expanding students' vocabulary, and reinforcing the cultivation of critical thinking, within the frame of their cultural identities. The proposed activities had as their aim the creative interconnections of the literary environment with the historic and cultural realities which are reflected in the literary discourse. Simultaneously, access to other fine arts and sciences, such as music and/or poetic compositions, can create more favourable circumstances for the engagement in, and familiarity with the Greek language. As such, within and among the different levels of language competence and the related learning outcomes (Council of Europe, 2001), the approach toward the use of selected passages was linked to the expansion of cultural education skills (Balodimas-Bartolomei & Katsas, 2020).

At the beginner's level (Level A) (Council of Europe, 2001), apart from the goal of having students acquire basic vocabulary through the reading of literary excerpts, the connection with various forms of language is pursued, even though poetic language in its syntax, and not only in its structure, is different from everyday communication. At this stage, the writing of texts is usually in diary mode and, as such, simple writing activities are recommended based on a literary prose extract or a poem in order to develop functional vocabulary, and engage with such texts through, for example, the use of simple comprehension questions. For the middle level (Level B) (Council of Europe, 2001), after the overall study of literary passages, re-telling such passages in the students' own words is recommended, so that in the language students use to retell a passage, historic and cultural elements that exist in it are localised, that is, contextualised. These activities contribute progressively to an increase in students' vocabulary and to their awareness of the structure of poetic/literary language which is generally made up of a variety of forms and structures typically not found in daily discourse. The students are encouraged to use these preliminary activities for the creation of their own final multimodal texts, independent of the topic they have chosen from the perspective of a cross-thematic approach and knowledge drawn from a variety of sources.

In the final level (Level C) (Council of Europe, 2001) where those students who have already acquired to a considerable degree the basic linguistic skills of the Greek language, the subsequent enrichment of vocabulary is pursued. Words and phrases which are not considered essential in the daily use of speakers, become an object of study in all of the students' meaningful discourse including for example, the use of synonyms, pronouns, words with multiple meanings, and homonyms, which they incorporate into their own usage both in their use of the spoken as well as the written language. Emphasis is also given to the students' ability to understand the distinction between literal and figurative meaning, as well as understanding the figurative use of language as a core feature of the literary environment. The functions of representative language are analysed and its creative mechanisms are tracked. At this level, the production of texts with the use of the

vocabulary for comment about the taught literary passages is favoured, as well as the analysis and writing of academic language and literary language.

Apart from local targeted dedications to Greek writers and poets whose works appear in bilingual lectures during the course, teaching is centred around the study of the poetry of C. Kavafis, M. Anagnostakis, T. Livaditis, N. Vrettakos, and O. Elytis. While in Greece for example, some evenings are dedicated to the recitation of these and poems by other Greek poets, with each group member (i.e., students/supporting staff) being required to select a poet and a representative poem for the recitation. In some instances, particular interest was shown by students for specific poetry, such as, for example, M. Polydouri's poem, *Only because you loved me*, or other poems which have also been set to music by well-known composers. The use of the musical form in the context of poetry in this instance, motivated students to request subsequent elaboration and extension of rich poetic language as their listening to the readings stimulated strong emotional responses.

### **Learning ICT communities in Australia: Learnline Greek at CDU**

The Greek In-Country Study Program at Charles Darwin University of Australia (CDU) is registered as a systematic effort in the use of tools increasingly common in long-distance education, in this case, through an electronic platform, namely *Blackboard Collaborate Ultra-Learnline* (Douri, 2020). The utilisation of a variety of continually emerging online technology and instructional technological platforms as well as the adoption of blended learning approaches (Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003; Khan, 2005) offer a deeper level of involvement for students, and secure their active engagement despite their participation from a distance. As such, problems of mobility, as well as lack of time are resolved, and inter-activity and regular communication are enabled (Skourtou, 2002).

The platform, *Blackboard Collaborate Ultra-Learnline Greek*, that is utilised by CDU, and which is upgraded regularly, is comprised of various Internet applications that support the needs of CDU's educational community (Evgeniou, 2019; Douri, 2020). *Blackboard* is a learning management system that gives special promise to online teaching, offering as it does, useful educational tools for the modification of lessons, the distribution of educational material, as well as synchronous-asynchronous communication between teachers and students (Evgeniou, 2019; Douri, 2020). *Blackboard* is easy to navigate and to use, and includes tools for online writing of educational material, enables online assessments with analytical entry of scores and grades, while also allowing access via mobile devices.

With *Blackboard Collaborate Ultra*, users are also given opportunities to connect in real time within a virtual collaborative classroom setting without the need for physical presence (Evgeniou, 2019; Douri, 2020). The online classroom context enables effective interaction between educators and students, and extends the range of the university's activities, thereby reducing costs while increasing outcomes and avenues of support for a range of communities, given that access to these resources virtual and not physical. Another useful online program is the language technology tool, *Camtasia Studio*, which has been incorporated in the platform *Learnline Greek* and concurrently enables and supports the

production of oral activities, with the possibility of recording through video, as well as providing opportunities to create and upload lectures, lessons, activities, and tests/quizzes. Another useful tool is *VoiceThread*, which enables the production of spoken language, the comprehension of oral texts, and the use of multi-modal conversations via recordings (Evgeniou, 2019; Douri, 2020). *VoiceThread* is a slide show tool that allows lecturers to have threaded online discussions with students prior to a lecture as these relate to each slide. At a practical level, *VoiceThread* is a virtual classroom where teachers can create and/or replicate face-to-face classrooms. With this tool, exciting interactive activities are realised, including the creation of sound bites, the recording of sound and visual archives, all of which can be used for a range of teaching purposes such as recordings for the improvement of pronunciation, and/or recording answers to comprehension questions of a passage, to identify a few of the most common uses.

In these ways, through the use of a considerable variety of technological applications, the development of the linguistic, communicative, and multicultural skills of the students who are learning the Greek language in the particular program described, is achieved, regardless of their physical location, while also concurrently forming and developing communities in close contact with the Greek context, as well as with the assistance of teachers and researchers who are situated in Greece.

## Conclusion

The Greek In-Country Study Program of Charles Darwin University was supported during its thirteen-year existence by the active participation and collaboration of many volunteers and donors, while it also fueled the collaboration of three academic institutions (Kourtis-Kazoullis et al., 2013; CDU, 2016; Frazis et al., 2019). Through the collaboration of Charles Darwin University with the University of the Aegean and especially the Faculty of Primary Education, and the University of Macedonia, there emerged an active community of learning, which exceeded the usual place-time limitations and physical obstacles formerly experienced with distance learning (Carment et al., 2019; Frazis et al., 2021). Within the multi-dimensional course/pathways related to education in the Greek language and of modern Greek culture, strong ties and networks have been created which, with the passing of time, have opened up new possibilities for the strengthening of the framework for the teaching and learning of heritage languages (Valdes, 2001; Damanakis, 2007; Aravossitas & Oikonomakou, 2018, 2020) not only in the diaspora. Furthermore, the program also facilitates the promotion of inter-disciplinary research (Carment et al., 2019; Frazis et al., 2021) with respect to the teaching of language in multicultural communities.

The creation of a mobile program in which *language in action* (Carment et al., 2019) is primary and in which heritage language learners and foreign students from Australia coexist with native speakers of the language, frees learners from the physical constraints of traditional physical classrooms and, as a result, from traditional modes of teaching. The teaching and learning of language is taken out of the artificial context of the traditional classroom and occurs instead within varied multicultural environments (Balodimas-Bartolomei & Katsas, 2020) enabled by current technological tools. As a consequence,

language learning and teaching have come to be perceived as a critical process (Freire, 1972; Luke, 2012). Within that frame, familiarity with authentic communicative situations and text genres, as well as the interactive relationships between language and society, and/or even within particular communities, are able to be perceived through the lens of the linguistic phenomena within a more comprehensive frame, namely, as historic, folkloric and multicultural phenomena, that in turn, digitally promote the cultivation of educational, functional, multicultural and critical skills (Fairclough, 1992; Halliday, 1994; Cope & Kalantzis, 1993) in ways that have, hitherto, been inconceivable.

Important, also, is the contribution of the program to the strengthening of identity (Cummins, 2000; Evangelinou-Yiannakis, 2015; Mizel, 2021) among students who descend from Greece and who have developed to a lesser or larger degree, a relationship with the country of origin (Oikonomakou et al., 2018). In this sense, contact with the Greek language and with Greek literature marks the beginning of a phase of redetermination and renegotiation of their identities (Frazis et al., 2019). This phase marks a process which, although exceeding the narrow limits of a traditional language learning program, operates within (a) the large gamut of removal to Greece and therefore, enabling a wider spectrum of experience (CDU, 2016); (b) the experience which accompanies the return to the birthplace of their parents or their grandparents, as often happens in the case of the Kalymnians of Darwin (Carment et al., 2019; Frazis et al., 2021); and (c) the research and collaborative process which unfolds during the elaboration of the project (Fragoulis & Tsipakides, 2009) through topics directly relevant to the students and staff of the three universities involved in the program.

Since 2007, a total of 175 students has participated in the program. This includes a significant percentage of Australian-born participants and a smaller percentage being Greece-born. The Greece-born participants have Greek as L1. Most Australian-born participants have Greek as L2. A very small percentage of Australian-born participants have Greek as L1.

Whilst reflections of the experience have been received from all participants over the years, future research could involve interviews with each of the two or three groups (Australian-born, L2 participants; Greece-born, L1 participants; as well as with any who fall into a mixed category, such as, Australian-born, L1 participants). The qualitative research would assist in evaluating the extent to which the program has helped to strengthen both language and cultural identity in the participants, and the impact it has had over the years (Hains-Wesson & Appleby, 2017).

The entire effort, as described in this paper, suggests great value in the creation of an innovative long-distance program for Greek language learning in the Northern Territory of Australia (Douri, 2020) as well as in Greece (Kourtis-Kazoullis et al., 2013). The platforms, *Learnline* and *Logou Hari*, which operate (or previously operated namely, *Logou Hari*) at CDU and the University of the Aegean, connect dynamic learning communities and give new content to the learning of a heritage language during a period of intense reclassification and mobility as is often, if not always experienced by a minority population. The program, as described in this paper, offers opportunities for interactive

forms of expression (Mallos, 2020) that enable connections and contexts for transitional identities to develop, especially for younger migrants through the online communication of communities and the embodiment of new media practices and digital networks. Studies have already been published about the historical, social and cultural dimensions of the migration of Greeks to Darwin (Carment et al., 2019; Frazis et al., 2021), and have made significant contributions to our understanding of the needs of educators of the Greek communities in the Northern Territory (Christie, 2000). They also contribute to the creation of broader programs of study for the learning of the Greek language, with the inclusion of various multicultural resources (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993).

The close collaboration of the three tertiary institutions has as its main outcome the coordinated activity of academics representing different specialties, who enrich, through their research, the shared didactic and educational initiatives described in this paper. Worthy of mention is the work of researchers who focus on different aspects of migration, analysing the formation and multi-varied activities developed by the diasporic communities of the Northern Territory of Australia (Clyne & Fernandez, 2008), as well as in other countries (e.g., Greece and the Balkans) based on current social developments (Panagiotopoulou et al., 2019). The organisation of conferences, the publication of articles and thematic volumes (Carment et al., 2019; Frazis et al., 2021), as well as the broadening of the framework of collaboration of the sectors through the extended use of technology related to long distance learning, also enable the promotion of research within those domains. Finally, at the centre of interest, remain the challenges of Greek language education in the diaspora (Damanakis, 2007) and the maintenance/revival of heritage languages (Aravossitas & Oikonomakou, 2020) in the current rapidly changing world.

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