

Language and culture guide

Modern Greek

Language experts agree that language learning is most effective when language and culture are linked. *The Polyglots* apps aim to spark children's interest in language and culture through play. This guide provides some general information about Modern Greek language and Greek culture that may be of interest to you and may extend children's learning.

About Modern Greek

Modern Greek is the official language of Greece and Cyprus. As well as being one of the official languages of the European Union, it is a major community language in Australia. Modern Greek is spoken by Greek communities in many places, such as the USA, Canada, Australia, the UK, Germany, Sweden, Belgium, Italy, Argentina, South Africa and Russia.

Early childhood education

Early childhood education in Greece is in pre-primary schools under the authority of the Ministry of Education, or in local government or private infant/child centres. Early childhood education usually starts at age 4 in pre-primary, and compulsory education begins at age 5. In 2019, 76 per cent of 4- to 6-year-old children in Greece attended early childhood education.¹ In Cyprus, 87 per cent of 3- to 6-year-old children attended in 2023.²

Language

Modern Greek is written in the Greek alphabet, which has 24 letters and has changed little since ancient times. In Modern Greek, each letter has its own upper- and lower-case forms. Accents are used on vowels.

Many English words have Greek origins but the structures of the two languages are very different.

Modern Greek has a strong spelling-to-sound correspondence and is sometimes called a phonetic language. There are only five vowel sounds (English has over 20).

Grammatically, Modern Greek is a gendered language: certain word classes (nouns, adjectives, articles, pronouns) have gender – they are either masculine, feminine or neuter; for example, 'ἡ μπανάνα' (feminine), 'ὁ χυμός' (masculine) or 'το σύκο' (neuter).

In Greek punctuation, the question mark looks like a semicolon.

For correct pronunciation, listen carefully to the words as they are spoken in the app or in the sound library in the app toolkit on the ELLA website.

Culture

Greece has a rich culture with a strong tradition in the arts, architecture, music and food.

A large number of people are Greek Orthodox (part of the Eastern Orthodox Church, as is the Church of Cyprus) but a number of other religions are also practised.

Politeness and customs

In Greece and Cyprus, depending on the time of day, you may say good morning/good day ('kalimera'), good afternoon ('kalo apogevma') or good evening ('kalispera') and shake hands when you meet or leave someone. Close friends and family may give two kisses or embrace.

Young people say 'Gia!' to their peers for 'Hello!' and 'Goodbye!' However, with their elders they mostly use greetings such as 'Gia sas!' and the more formal goodbye 'Antio!'

Culture in *The Polyglots* apps

As children play with the apps, they can discover fun and intriguing Greek cultural references, such as an owl, a fishing boat, a fig, a bouzouki and a tourta. You can learn more about the cultural references in the app toolkit.

¹ Education policy in Greece: A preliminary assessment, OECD, 2017

² Early childhood care and education regional report: Europe and North America, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2010

Interesting topics

Animals

Some animals of Greece include:

- brown bears
- deer
- wildcats and lynxes
- foxes, wolves and jackals
- wild boar
- wild goats and wild sheep or mouflon
- weasels, polecats, martens, badgers and otters
- porcupines and hedgehogs
- birds such as owls, eagles, vultures, pelicans, storks and herons and many species of migratory birds
- sea animals such as dolphins, seals, whales and turtles.

Some of these animals are also found in Cyprus.

Arts

Greece is rich in the arts, including visual arts, theatre, music, architecture and literature.

- Famous ancient Greek artists include sculptors Phidias and Praxiteles. Sculptures, usually in marble or bronze, were often of gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines, or athletes.
- The pottery of ancient Greece is renowned, not only for its beautiful shapes but also for its striking painted decoration.
- Most ancient Greek cities had a theatre and the plays performed there were usually either comedies or tragedies. Actors wore masks to represent their characters.
- Homer, the writer of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, is one of the best known of the ancient Greek writers. More modern famous poets are Odysseus Elytis and George Seferis.



Interesting topics

Food	Food has a special role in Greek culture. Greek people traditionally eat the main meal in the middle of the day. Sharing a meal with family every day is very important. Many Greek people still shop daily for food, usually from local markets and small shops. There are many different regional variations in Greek cuisine. • Small dishes (mezes) frequently help make up a main meal, served with salads, dips and pita bread. • Olive oil and cheese are two of Greece's most famous products. There are hundreds of varieties of cheese and every region in Greece has its own specialties. • Well-known Greek dishes include moussaka, souvlaki, spanakopita and dolmades. • There are many delicious Greek pastries, cakes and desserts, such as tourta, baklava, koulourakia, kourabiedes, loukoumades and galaktoboureko.
Sports	• Greece was the birth place of the Olympic Games, with the first recorded ancient Olympics taking place around 776 BCE in Olympia. Greece has hosted the modern Olympic Games twice. Greece always enters the stadium first during the parade of nations. • Today, soccer and basketball are the two most popular sports in Greece. Water sports, such as sailing and windsurfing, are especially popular along the coastline. • Wrestling was the most popular organised sport in ancient Greece. It was added to the ancient Olympic Games in 708 BCE as part of the pentathlon. Freestyle and Greco-Roman wrestling are part of the modern Games.
Games	Traditional games include: • Little Eleni (H mikri Eleni): a group of children hold hands in a circle and walk anticlockwise, singing a song. One child stays in the middle of the circle with their eyes covered. When the song finishes, the child in the middle puts their hands on another child's shoulders and guesses who the child is. If they are right, the child they named takes a turn in the middle. • Abariza: a chasing game with two teams. Each team has an abariza (a spot, such as a tree or basketball column) in their territory and the children try to touch the abariza of the other team without being touched.



Interesting topics

Places

- The Acropolis, built high (acro) above the city (polis) of Athens, contains the Parthenon, a temple built in the 5th century BCE to honour the goddess Athena, along with other buildings of significance.
- Knossos, an archeological site on the island of Crete, is the palace and surrounding city of King Minos. It was the capital of the Minoan civilisation, which existed from around 3000 BCE to about 1100 BCE.
- Delphi, on the slopes of Mt Parnassus, was the site of the oracle of Delphi who was consulted by the ancient Greeks about important decisions.
- Mount Olympus is not only the highest mountain in Greece, it was traditionally regarded as the home of the gods, such as Zeus and his wife Hera.
- The Tombs of the Kings site near Paphos (on Cyprus) is an ancient necropolis (cemetery) with underground burial chambers carved out of rock.

Geography and climate

Greece consists of a large mainland at the southern end of the Balkan Peninsula, with two peninsulas and an archipelago of thousands of islands ranging from small to large. Greece has 13,676 kilometres of coastline and is bordered by the Aegean Sea, the Mediterranean Sea and the Ionian Sea. Most of Greece is mountainous or hilly.

Greece mainly has a Mediterranean climate, with hot, dry summers and cold, wet winters. There are long sunny periods throughout the year. The coastal regions don't get very cold in winter, whereas inland, in the north and in the mountains, it can get very cold and snowy. Greece is also affected by strong winds, such as the sirocco from North Africa and the meltemi from north-eastern Greece.

Cyprus is the third largest island in the Mediterranean. It has two major mountain ranges with a central plain between them. It also has a Mediterranean climate.

Note: This document contains content that has been gathered through independent research and consultation with subject matter experts. The figures and information included in this document should be reviewed for accuracy over time.

