

**Pre-Reading Strategies in Action:
A Teacher's Guide to a Modern Foreign Language Teaching
Technique**

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Introduction

When I was a graduate student, a Classics professor who was at the end of his career told me that when he looked back on his teaching, it was a wonder to him that the students in his intermediate Latin classrooms had survived at all, let alone gone on to more advanced classrooms. Far worse than the ordinary beginning Latin classroom, he stated, was the intermediate Latin classroom, which was often a wretched place because students were forcibly yanked from the safe harbors of *Wheelock* or some other beginning Latin text and thrown into the waves of Latin syntax and grammar that they encountered in real Latin literature, often without having had any prior practice at reading authentic Latin texts at all. But the most miserable intermediate Latin classroom of all, according to this professor, was the one which ends up degenerating into recital, where everyone goes around the room and takes their turn at translating. Repeated sessions of this, he warned, often deteriorate into students demonstrating their mediocre sight-reading ability. While one person is reciting, others have pen to paper and are frantically copying down the parts they did not get to translate in class, so as to create the “perfect” translation. He warned us against allowing students to fall victim to this practice, but did not offer a solution.

Inspired, however, by his warning and by the many challenges that intermediate Latin students of my own have offered me, I spent many years trying different techniques out on my intermediate Latin classrooms. Finally, when I was an assistant professor at a college which let faculty enroll in courses for free, and had the opportunity to take a modern language from one of my colleagues, I was given the chance to see how modern language classrooms have dealt with this problem for years. I was then able to combine my experience teaching intermediate Latin and Greek with what I had learned from going back to school with undergraduates who were motivated to learn a modern language -- many years after I was an undergraduate myself. What I discovered from my own experiences and from the research I did to write this paper¹ was that modern language teachers integrate the act of learning the vocabulary and other aspects of the language such as grammar and syntax that are needed in order to have active knowledge of the language with the process of translating literature. My paper, therefore, will talk in brief about ways to get students to integrate both

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the tasks of actively learning the language with actively reading texts into their Latin learning experience, by using a methodology called pre-reading as an approach to secondary literature. In the first part I will define pre-reading and provide a context for its use in modern language classrooms, and in the second part I will discuss how I use pre-reading techniques in my own intermediate Latin language courses.

The Case for using Pre-Reading in the Language Classroom

According to a 1999 study of modern language literature reading and teaching techniques published by Karen Turner, until the early 1980s a significant number of modern language classrooms in Great Britain employed the following methodology to teach students to read literature at the proficiency level they would be expected to attain in advanced foreign-language translation courses at a college or university:

The favoured approach of the time was to translate the text into English, word for word, and to discuss the plot and characters in English too. Examination questions and answers were, for the most part, written in English and examiners were seeking not so much a personal response from examinees but rather some “critical orthodoxy” or “ready-made judgments” (Widdowson 1975, pp. 74-5) that had been provided by the teacher and rote learned for regurgitation on the examination paper.

Turner notes that this methodology was “inherited” from the teaching of Latin and Greek. But during the late 1980s a great reorganization occurred in the curriculum in Great Britain, which encouraged modern language teachers to rethink how literature was taught and why it was being taught in intermediate language classrooms. As the dissatisfaction with the classical model for teaching literature grew, the trend in secondary language acquisition shifted to “learner-centred models of learning” where the students focused more on communication and less on grammar and translation. As a result, literature was no longer required as a component to the syllabus and teachers were then able to choose to include non-literary activities such as adding cultural or historical components to their syllabi as an optional replacement. But not everyone gave up reading literature in their classrooms, and, as Turner argues, when literature is included in the curriculum and is taught using a methodology that allows teachers to demonstrate effectively how all the components of their syllabus employ the language “in use,” reading literature is directly linked to the students’ success at learning the language (Turner 1999, 209-12).

One of the methods that modern language classrooms use to raise interest in reading texts at the intermediate and advanced levels that I have tried with great success is a technique called pre-reading. Pre-reading can take many diverse forms and involve many different activities that engage the students in active learning and encourage them to think about what they are going to be doing before they do it. In its most basic form it can be defined as an exercise that presents the key concepts within a text and provides a context and background information for the literature that students are about to read. Pre-reading can aid students through the difficult transition from beginning language classes to the more text-based and authentic language experience that is the goal of the intermediate and advanced Latin classrooms.

This approach to learning a language through reading literature supports two key concepts: 1) the idea that the student will need a context into which they can insert the details of the literature that they are reading and 2) that independent reading needs to be supported with background materials. As students become more comfortable with the texts they are given, they can complete independent and productive assignments such as skimming a passage and then writing a summary of what they have read, or drawing a picture that includes labeling the key details in Latin to demonstrate that they have understood the particulars of a scene they have just read. Exercises such as these force pupils to go beyond simply copying down information (Turner 1999, 216-20). Successful completion of the previous activities also enables students to proceed to the next step in intermediate language learning, which is the act of interpreting the literature.

Two of the easiest pre-reading methods are skimming or scanning a text for relevant information. But what to have students look for? Too little information and it will not be helpful, and too much and it will be overwhelming and the student will not want to do the actual reading of the text. One simple way to do this is to have the students listen to the text and take dictation and then answer questions. Another method requires that the students listen to the text read aloud at the same time they are looking at it and asks them to write down what they consider to be the salient points from a text (Bax 2000, 212-13). They can then compare their salient points in small groups or with the entire class. But this is not always practical, depending on which text you are using. While the above dictation-style exercises are eminently suited to the *Oxford Latin Course*, *Wheelock's Latin Reader*, for example, does not necessarily lend itself readily to activities of that sort.

Wheelock's Latin Reader emphasizes a grammar-translation approach, meaning that the main emphasis in the beginning Latin sequence is on having students drill forms and vocabulary and practice their translation skills with exercises consisting of short Latin *sententiae*. One of the main drawbacks to this methodology is that this does not emphasize the kinds of skills students need to learn in order to be prepared to read continuous prose passages and they often encounter quite a bit of difficulty when doing so (Johnson 1987, 249). So when reading literature out of an intermediate modern language text that is structured in a way that is similar to *Wheelock's Latin Reader*, what modern language teachers do is make up a "help-sheet" which can be defined as a literature guide sometimes "written in the target language, [but its main goal is to explain] points of particular cultural and linguistic interest, or [clarify] areas of potential linguistic and/or cultural misunderstanding or difficulty," (Morgan and Cain 2000, 33). This type of worksheet, which requires students to respond to questions about the text, is a particularly effective form of pre-reading activity that prompts readers to reflect on what they are about to encounter in a text. Also, any form of writing exercise, including worksheets which develop a sense of authorship, encourage students to think critically about what they are doing. Another benefit of a pre-reading worksheet is that it allows students to check for accuracy. This is the equivalent in some ways of a language drill sheet, where the student has the opportunity to be pushed a bit in order to reinforce what they already know. It also allows the teacher to gradually increase the difficulty of the worksheets as well. And the biggest benefit of all is that the grammar becomes not the hindrance, but the help to the assignment. Thus, this type of exercise has been proven to help the learner go beyond learning things by rote. This has in my classroom helped to eliminate the student who is merely memorizing *Wheelock* passages and hanging on

to a C- or a D for dear life despite my best prior efforts to awaken their interest in doing a bit more. It is also a good idea to let the students correct one another's pre-reading worksheets at first, when doing these exercises, as you can, as a teacher, hinder effective learning if you over-correct (Field 1999, 193).

Chamberlain presents another pre-reading model, which can be adapted to suit the Latin classroom. Her approach involves a multi-step procedure: the first part requires the teacher to present the students with a biography of the author whose text they are reading, in order to give the students background information. If possible, the sketch should be followed up with a series of questions that encourage the students to predict the possible themes that will emerge once they begin reading the text. The second part requires the student to think about how the text is organized. Through vocabulary building exercises which drill students in the practice of guessing at a word's meaning from its context and by means of presenting a series of questions about syntax which place concepts within the context of larger parts of the text, students can gain a better understanding of the text they are about to read (www.dartmouth.edu/~vfund/files/downloads/vfsample.pdf). In addition to looking for modern language classroom materials to adapt, a useful web site for the classics which contains many helpful resources can be found at this URL: <http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/consortium/kelly.html>.

Using Pre-Reading in the Latin Classroom

Some Latin teachers at both the secondary and college levels already have incorporated pre-reading techniques into their classrooms, but for the uninitiated, it is often difficult to imagine how to include such methods in the daily teaching routine. This is especially true if you have a teaching schedule where the Latin class only meets a few times a week, as often happens in college settings. Since modern language textbooks often suggest techniques that may not be suited to the Latin classroom, the instructor will have to adapt the exercises somewhat, and in this example I have modified this kind of pre-reading methodology to use with *Wheelock's Latin Reader*. My methodology is also in part inspired by Father Reginald Foster's Latin classroom, as he makes extensive use of grammatical and syntactical cues within a text to tip off his students as to what they need to know before they begin to translate a passage, but he does it in a way that gets the students thinking about Latin as an active and living language. As Father Reginald has pointed out to me, there is a difference between asking a student, "Tell me how to say "Let's go!" in Latin and asking "What is the first person, plural, present subjunctive used as an imperative of *eo*?" and the first of these cues is far more likely to elicit the correct response, *eamus*. Although my approach does allow for questions that use grammatical terms, my main goal is to get the students to think actively about the meaning of what they are translating. Using this methodology in the Latin classroom encourages students to think about the kinds of information you need to know in order to understand a text. Moreover, it allows students to go beyond a self-guided translation exercise which often amounts to them paging through a dictionary and trying to find a one-to-one correspondence between the one-word English definitions and the Latin words on the page in front of them. The passage I have chosen is from *Wheelock's Latin Reader* and the context is one of Cicero's letters to Atticus, 2.23. After giving the students some information about the social history of the time and placing the letter into historical context, I can incorporate a cultural pre-reading exercise. In the body of this passage Cicero is trying to persuade Atticus to do something and speaks highly of their

friendship as part of his method for doing so, so I ask the students to jot down 4-5 attributes that they find ideal in a friend. I then ask them to note, as they are reading, 4-5 qualities Cicero describes when he praises his friendship with Atticus. The two lists can later be used as a post-reading exercise to discuss how and if the nature of friendship has changed from Cicero's time to the present. I then turn to the text. I have included an excerpt here from pages 51-52:

Ad Atticum 2.23

Cicero Attico Sal.

Numquam ante arbitror te epistulam meam legisse nisi mea manu scriptam. Ex eo colligere poteris quanta occupatione distinear. Nam cum vacui temporis nihil haberem et cum recreandae voculae causa necesse esset mihi ambulare, haec dictavi ambulans.

Primum igitur illud te scire volo: Sampsiceramum, nostrum amicum, vehementer sui status paenitere, restituique in eum locum cupere ex quo decedit, doloremque suum impertire nobis et medicinam interdum aperte quaerere, quam ego possum invenire nullam; deinde omnes illius partis auctores ac socios, nullo adversario, consenescere, consensionem universorum nec voluntatis nec sermonis maiorem umquam fuisse.

My pre-reading worksheet for this section of the letter would look something like this:

Background: Provide a context for Cicero's letter.
Cultural Question: As you are reading, make a list of the qualities that Cicero values most when he is describing his friendship with Atticus.
Syntax: Distinear: <i>Why is this subjunctive?</i> (The four most vital words in the intermediate Latin classroom) <i>Does the mood affect the translation?</i>
Communicating Meaning: Cum = <i>When?</i> <i>Can you think of other options for translating it?</i>
Drill: <i>Why is recreandae voculae in the genitive? If you saw ad recreandam voculam instead you could translate it as _____?</i>
Syntax: Restitui(que) <i>looks as if it might mean "(and) I have restored)" as if it is the third part of restituo but if you read carefully, you know that this form is really _____?</i>
Cultural Insight: Use this point to discuss the genre of letter writing or what this text tells the modern reader about the culture. Ex: How private and honest is a letter? What kind of person does Cicero present himself as in his letters?

At this point I turn to the four words that are the most important and perhaps the most dreaded by Latin students in the intermediate Latin classroom, "Why is this verb subjunctive?" and ask about the verb *distinear*. But then I can take the exercise a step further and ask what happens if I change the tense of the leading verb at the front of the sentence? How does this affect the subjunctive? This kind of drill is an extremely effective way to test

active knowledge of classroom learning. And I cue them to review the section on the sequence of tenses in their *Wheelock* or give them a specific passage in a grammar such as the online *New Latin Grammar* to review. In the next line, I ask them “What if you were *not* allowed to translate every “cum” that you came across as “when” and you had to think of something else? What would you use instead?” The worksheet can be increased as needed. So, for example, I can continue to drill students on the use of the form *recreandae* by asking them what other constructions I can employ besides *causa* to express purpose. I can also use my pre-reading worksheet to call students’ attention to forms, such as the verb *restitui*, that look at first glance as though they could be one thing but really other options need to be considered. At the end of the exercise you can ask questions about how this text provides cultural insight into the times, or ask a question about the genre of letter writing. For example, students often tend to think of the letters as private, but even if Cicero had an audience of one, he was still writing for an audience.

Conclusion

While one can argue that some of the potential drawbacks of pre-reading exercises include the way in which this methodology focuses the students’ attention primarily on the specifics of learning grammar and vocabulary and turning words or phrases into English in order to be able to comprehend a continuous passage of Latin, it is also possible to look at the other side of the debate, which points out that pre-reading allows you to introduce information inductively and within the context of a Latin passage. Pre-reading has changed the way in which I teach because when I have students who are returning from a summer of not looking at Latin or when I have a classroom full of students who are at varied levels, using this type of pre-reading worksheet in the first few weeks (or even longer) as a grammar review can help everyone come to class prepared. It has also served as an effective reading guide for my students who tend to struggle more with the text. One of the key distinctions I would like to make between giving a student a commentary to look at versus a pre-reading worksheet is that the pre-reading sheet encourages more active learning of forms and content. Moreover, employing this kind of methodology in my classroom allows students to understand the process by which the other students are grasping the meaning of the translation. I can also use these worksheets as post-reading, follow-up exercises to ascertain how much students have learned from the text. Students who are struggling a bit more with the text learn the kinds of questions they need to be asking themselves when they approach the text, and as a result, they learn how to become active thinkers and participants in the Latin course and more independent learners outside of the class.

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