

From Latin III to Literature: Let Grammar Be Your Guide

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Here's the situation: a Latin III class has just superbly and nearly flawlessly translated the last story of their textbook series. They've left you with the feeling that their grammatical skills are rock solid and level of preparation couldn't be better. Then, almost as if alien beings visited each and every one of your students overnight and drained their brains completely, as soon as you begin to read authentic Latin with these very same students, they can barely find the subject and the verb of the first clause in the reading. This transition period, between textbook and authentic Latin, challenges all of us at some point in our programs.

What is the key to turning this corner in an intermediate Latin student's education? Over the past three years or so, as I have experienced this issue, one answer that has yielded very positive results in my classroom is this: insisting that the students have thoroughly learned their grammar and morphology. Nothing is more basic, nor more important, than making sure that our students not only understand that when "-os" appears at the end of a Latin word, for example, it looks suspiciously like a noun, but that it also has to be used as either a direct object, or the subject of an indirect statement. However, we must be careful not to assume too readily that the knowledge surrounding the use and meaning of the accusative case has found a permanent place in our students' knowledge base. These types of assumptions can be rather risky during the transition into authentic literature.

In the spring of 2003, my own Latin III class taught me this very valuable lesson about the potential danger of making these assumptions. Anything that could have gone wrong in the class, did. With a few more years insulating that experience, I now see several factors that contributed to this collective collapse of knowledge. The group of students I had in that class was highly capable and a very talented bunch, and by no means do I want to suggest that their intellectual abilities were at the root of this problem. It was me. We finished our first semester in fine shape, but I had a sort of nagging suspicion that the students' grasp of the grammar was a bit shaky, in spite of their quiz scores being quite good.

For as much as I absolutely love and adore the *Cambridge Latin Course*, one of its disadvantages is that the sentence patterns do grow to be rather predictable, and for wily high school honors students, who are masterful manipulators, constantly seeking the path or paths of least resistance, they rely on these patterns and memorize those specific sentence structures without paying careful attention to the details of the language. This predictability of sentence patterns can be a time bomb. It detonated with these students. We made it to Stage 36 at the beginning of our second semester and had learned all the tenses of the infinitive and how they are used and translated in indirect statements. I decided somewhat randomly one day to do some oral review and drilling of our grammatical and syntactical knowledge. I

started with asking the class to tell me how form an indirect statement. I was met with sustained silence. So, being the dutiful teacher, I gave them some hints to remember what a “head verb” was. Still nothing. Okay, well, maybe if I just help them with the accusative part of the construction, we’ll be good from there. Nope. To my horror and amazement, after I finished their question for them and reminded them that this particular construction is concluded with an infinitive, I was asked, “What’s an infinitive?” What can one really do other than scream or tear one’s hair out at that point?

That experience was my wake up call. I had to do something. What I realized I had done was this: I hadn’t insisted that they be accountable this information. As I had presented my lesson on indirect statements to them, they had followed my every example, and gave all the right answers when the information was fresh and new. I gave them their quiz on the material, and they all did very well, and so I thought that they had learned the material. What I saw in the results of the quiz was a dazzling display of their short-term memories. Since the scores looked so good, I moved on to new material without holding them accountable for all of that information.

My solution for that Latin III class at the time was to place the onus of learning this extremely necessary and important information on them. As a class, we generated a list of the grammatical and syntactical issues that they felt they most needed to review, or relearn, or learn for the first time. I asked them to partner up among themselves, and then explained to them that the list they had just created was the list of topics from which they could choose to create a lesson and re-teach to their classmates. The frustrated part of me felt that if they weren’t listening to me, maybe they would listen to each other better. Each group first had to present a grammatical lesson on their review topic, and then led some practice activities or played a review game that they had created, and lastly, they were responsible for composing five exam-quality multiple choice questions on their topic. I compiled the questions from all the groups and used it (with some minor editing) as their test for this review unit. There was some improvement after this experiment, but I still felt like this intervention was too little, too late.

I realized that if I wanted to prevent such a scenario in future years, I needed to change something in the lower levels, and I needed to do it as quickly as I could. I turned to my group of Latin II students at that time and began to immediately re-tread my class with them. It is this attention that I paid to my Latin II classes that yielded remarkably better results in their Latin III experience. Based on that experience, I firmly believe that Latin II is the critical time to begin students’ preparation for bridging the reading gap.

Before explaining my approach to Latin II, I want to share some of the observations I have made on student behavior that have driven this adjustment of my class. First, kids are very accomplished con artists, especially adolescents. They can get you to believe anything and can convince you that they know everything. All they need is a little advanced warning, and they can crank up that short-term memory and perform fantastically on any given grammatical quiz. Second, kids

expend great amounts of energy to find short cuts. If only they were to spend that energy on simply learning their material in the first place! Third, and most importantly, kids will rise to meet high expectations set for them. And this is the characteristic that we can learn to artfully exploit in bridging the reading gap.

The activity that is now the foundation of my Latin II class grew out of now deceased Minnesota graduation standards project, which was called “The Profiles of Learning,” and was based on a “show what you know” philosophy of assessment. The foreign language “Performance Packages” were just beginning to be developed the year I was hired at my current school, and I thought it would be wise to get involved at the ground floor of this project. This goal of this style of assessment was to embed the projects into the curriculum, so that at the end of the class, the students would have tangible evidence of the information they had learned in that particular class. The idea of creating a portfolio project for Latin II seemed to satisfy the requirements for “The Profiles of Learning” quite well. It is this portfolio project that has made a substantial amount of difference in my students’ retention of basic Latin morphology and grammar. The secret to the success is in how the portfolio is used.

At the beginning of their Latin II year, the students are required to obtain a 1” 3-ring binder and divide it into specifically designated sections. The most important section is the one for their Reference Packet. This packet is a set of blank templates for noun charts, verb charts, adjective charts, pronoun charts, etc. In essence, by the end of the class, they have composed and compiled most of what is in the appendices of their textbook. As we review material from Latin I, for example, the imperfect tense in all five conjugations, the students must find the Imperfect Active Indicative chart in their packet and complete it with the model verbs I have provided. The same process happens for all other verb tenses, noun declensions, *hic haec hoc*, and so on. As students complete these pieces of review, the accountability factor accompanying this project takes affect. I tell them that whatever has been codified in these charts becomes fair game for a pop quiz. Any chart, any time, be prepared to be tested. The students’ reliance on that old, trustworthy short-term memory must now be replaced with a dedicated effort to commit all of that information into their long-term memory. This commitment of information is so very critical to a student’s ability to gain a proficient level of reading authentic literature.

I am of the belief that a strong knowledge of the structure of the Latin language should be the top teaching priority in any Latin classroom. Part of this approach comes from the nature of the Latin program at my school. I teach in one of three public high schools, all serving grades 9-12, in a city of approximately 88,000 residents. Latin never has had a place in the middle school, and as far as the eye can see, more than likely will not ever find an opening there. The first time students have the opportunity to study Latin is in 9th grade. An additional pressure facing most, if not all, public school Latin programs is enrollment. What may seem to be a perfectly average class size in most systems (24 students, for example), is a small class in my school. Anything much smaller than that, and no class section is offered. By the time my students make it to Latin IV, I may have anywhere between 13-20

students registered for the class, but that enrollment is not substantial enough to justify a section. The solution that my students and I have found to remedy this scenario is that they participate in a concurrent enrollment program in which they earn both high school and college credit with the University of Minnesota and take the second year sequence of courses that they offer. What this means for me, as the teacher responsible for preparing these young scholars to succeed in meeting authentic literature offered at a university sophomore level, is that I need to make sure that their language skills are ready to meet those upcoming challenges.

The choice I have made is to focus, almost exclusively, on teaching my Latin I, II, and III students as much as I can about the grammar and syntax of our beloved language. With only three years to take students from *Caecilius est pater* to *Arma virumque cano*, time is precious and choices need to be made. There is always the handful of students who ask, “Can’t we do more culture?” I always give them this answer: the language *IS* the culture. How do we know what daily life was like for the upper classes of Rome in the latter part of the 1st century CE? Pliny the Younger tells us in his own words. That’s culture. What is one of the best ways we can make sure our students have the keys to unlock that cultural treasure trove? Teach them the language. Nothing is more beautiful than to watch students work on a reading assignment when all they need to do is look up vocabulary, because the morphology, grammar, and syntax are already under control.

Other thoughts on the topic of bridging this reading gap advocate a stronger emphasis on providing the students with a broader knowledge base of ancient culture. One of these advocates is Professor Kenneth Kitchell in his article “Latin III’s Dirty Little Secret: Why Johnny Can’t Read.”¹ In his article, Kitchell coins the term “Classical Literacy” based on E. D. Hirsch, Jr.’s 1987 publication *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, and he argues that the most significant obstacle to a student’s proficiency in reading is their lack of knowledge of geographical places, mythology, history, and politics. He acknowledges that weak grammar and vocabulary can be a component of a student’s challenge in being able to read proficiently, but proceeds in his discussion with the assumption that students have a solid grammatical foundation. He places much more responsibility for the problem of a reading gap on a student’s lack of cultural knowledge. This contextual information does play a very real part in the reading process and is relevant issue that can greatly impact a student’s comprehension of any literature passage. But, I would suggest that through a student’s ability to read *because* of a strong and solid grammatical background, the acquisition of this idea of Cultural Literacy becomes the ends rather than the means of reading intermediate and advanced level Latin literature.

One example that Kitchell uses to illustrate the argument for a lack of Classical Literacy being an impediment to a student’s reading ability is Pliny’s famous letter describing the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius. Pliny describes the debris

¹ Kenneth Kitchell, Jr., “Latin III’s Dirty Little Secret—Why Johnny Can’t Read” *New England Classical Newsletter* (27 [2000], 206-226).

cloud rising from Vesuvius as looking like a pine tree. The point that Kitchell makes here is that the pre-conceived schema a student has for the words “pine tree” is that triangular shaped coniferous tree, typically seen in the northern latitudes. For students who live in the northern climes of the United States especially, this is a very fair observation. But, I would argue, here is where a student’s fundamental grammatical and basic reading and reasoning skills can trump a case for Classical Literacy. The Latin of this section where Pliny compares the erupting cloud of debris to a pine tree is: “*Nam longissimo velut trunco elata in altum quibusdam ramis diffundebatur, ...*.” For the sake of an example, let’s postulate the following for a literal student translation of that line: “For just as (it, i.e. the cloud) having been pressed out from a very long trunk it is spread out into the heavens with what one might call branches,” A student who would be able to produce a translation like this would demonstrate an understanding that the participle modifies the subject which, in this case, is in the previous sentence, that the verb is passive and in the imperfect tense, and that the ablatives function adverbially. When the grammar is accurately rendered, and some critical and imaginative thinking is applied to the interpretation of the clause or sentence, even a student has no idea what an Italian pine tree looks like, would be able to create an accurate mental image.

I am reluctant to accept a basic assumption that students who struggle in an intermediate or advanced Latin class have a strong foundation in the basics of the language. This reluctance reinforces itself to me every year when many of my tenth grade students are still working on perfecting their understanding of the difference between adjectives and adverbs in English. If, on the other hand, a student is well grounded in his or her knowledge of the language, acquiring this cultural information from all of our primary sources becomes the goal of reading literature, and the discussion of these details in class can bear much fruit. To teach our students the amount of cultural information that they need to comfortably digest all that they might read in these upper levels would almost necessitate offering concurrent courses of history and civilization with each level of Latin. But if we use our time with our students to help them build an immovable foundation of the grammatical elements of the Latin language, they will be able to access so much of that knowledge of the ancient world on their own.

The most effective Latin classrooms manage a good balance between language and culture, and one cannot exist without the other. But after seeing so many students transfer into my program lacking a solid grammatical background and listening to so many of my colleagues who teach at the college and university levels lamenting the lack of grammatical preparation they see in many of their students, I do firmly believe that the grammar and syntax of the Latin language deserves top priority. An emphasis on Cultural Literacy would be well suited to Latin programs that are fortunate enough to be vertically aligned from grade 7 through grade 12 and include an AP course or two or three as the capstone of a program. For those programs that are presented with the need to make a choice between the two due to time or program restraints, we do our student the greater good to err on the side of teaching the language.