Teaching The Second Year Latin Student to Swim the Mississippi

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Rex Stem
University of California, Davis
rexstem@hotmail.com

It is the goal of teaching well that animates this panel today, and this goal deserves the attention. Your commitment to teaching should not be left to fumble in the shadow of your commitment to research, but it should be pursued as the healthy complement of that research. CAMWS believes in this, and so should you, which is why you should keep coming to CAMWS and keep coming to panels like these. Never outgrow the motivation to become a better teacher.

One reason I am always looking for ways to help me improve as a teacher is because good teaching is hard. I find it easy to articulate what I want the students to learn, but much harder to articulate the steps by which I might help them get there. One thing I have definitely learned is that a good teacher has to keep in mind the student's perspective on the material, and the gap that exists between the student's perspective and the instructor's perspective. Once I can conceive of that gap, its nature and its size, then I have to design and embark upon a series a steps that can help close that gap and lead my students in the direction I want them to go.

To say that, however, is to be abstract and generalizing, and good teaching – as well as good talking about good teaching – requires specifics, so today I want to try to demonstrate what I mean through concrete examples. My focus today is on intermediate Latin, what at the college level would be the beginning through the middle of the second year of instruction. The students at this level have been introduced to the whole of Latin grammar in their first year of instruction, and they come to their second year ready to put all their knowledge toward the task of reading authentic specimens of Latin literature.

I like to teach Caesar at this level. He is an interesting and famous guy who writes a beautifully clear Latin sentence. My goal is for my students to come to appreciate his clarity. Imagine, for example, that we are reading the first book of Caesar's *Gallic War*, and we find:

> **I.36.1:** *Ad haec Ariovistus respondit: ius esse belli, ut, qui vicissent, eis, quos vicissent, quem ad modum vellent, imperarent; item populum Romanum victis non ad alterius praescriptum, sed ad suum arbitrium, imperare consuesse*.
>
> [To this Ariovistus responded that it was a law of war that those who had conquered should rule over those whom they had conquered in whatever way they wished; (that) the Roman people, likewise, were accustomed to rule over the conquered not according to another's direction, but according to their own judgment.]

The bulk of the sentence is in indirect speech after *Ariovistus respondit*, and the first half of the indirect speech contains a subordinate substantive clause *ut imperarent* as well as relative clauses of characteristic within that substantive clause: *qui vicissent*, *quos vicissent*. This is the kind of sentence that I find fun to teach, for it requires students to do a lot things in quick succession, which is an efficient way for me the instructor to see where any problems might be.

Just above I said that I find it easier to articulate what I want my students to learn than what steps I can take to help them learn those things. In this sentence, for example, I want them to be able to translate it as I did above, to be able to explain why the subjunctive verbs are

subjunctive, and to be able to assess the characterizing effect of Ariovistus' claim. I would welcome such questions from my students as: whether *quem ad modum vellent* here is an indirect question or another relative clause of characteristic; or, how best to translate in English the concept of *ius belli*; or, whether Caesar or his audience would be likely to accept the content of Ariovistus' argument. Back when I was in your shoes, those questions are what I would have made sure I could answer, because I perceived it as my job to teach my students to know such things: accuracy in grammatical comprehension, fluidity in English translation, and cultural and rhetorical interpretation.

All of that remains true to this day, but I have since come to see that I largely misunderstood my task as a teacher of intermediate Latin. Because, you see, the student who could do all those things I just asked to be done was no longer an intermediate student. The student who had these answers was ready for advanced undergraduate work, and my job, relative to that intermediate student, was already done. In sum, I was focusing on the endpoint of the teaching process, not on the means of getting the student to that point.

The real challenge of teaching the intermediate student is in building a framework within which the student can learn how to answer these advanced questions. My mistake – and I suspect that it is a common mistake among those of us who read Latin for a living – was in slighting where the student was coming from and focusing too much on the end result. Because in the middle, in the student's perspective, is a swirl of confusion, doubt, and panic.

Teaching the first year Latin student, I suggest, is like teaching someone to swim in a backyard pool. There is a lot of splashing, and every now and then the swimmer gets submerged in an unsettling way, but both swimmer and teacher know that the edge of the pool is near, that there is no real danger (only discomfort and embarrassment), and that progress can be measured in definite and measurable increments. Teaching the second year Latin student, however, is like throwing that student into a big and dirty river (like the one just outside this hotel). These students think they are still in the shallow end with a sentence like *Ariovistus respondit*, but then they find themselves meeting rough water in the form of substantive and characterizing subjunctive clauses. Because the truth is – when reading literary Latin – that its language is not like an in-ground pool. It is unbounded, idiomatic, and awesome.

What I would recognize as a change in the textual current is, for the intermediate student, but a continuing muddy expanse that becomes merely more or less muddy. We in this room, who find pleasure in reading Latin, we know how to navigate these waters. We like to strain our Latin muscles and we don't mind getting wet. But let us recognize what we are doing when we teach intermediate students. We are trying to get them to swim the Mississippi, and we have to recognize that they are going to question why we are so sure that swimming such a big muddy river is a good idea. Such students need coaching more than ever before, and we coaches need to be ready.

Before I summarize my coaching agenda, let me note that it does not really matter what text you are reading. Some of you may end up teaching second year Latin where the readings or the textbook are already set for you. Some of you may love Caesar's prose for its narrative flow, some may loathe his self-satisfaction and teach only poetry. What matters, I would argue, is that you respect the intermediate student as a work in progress, and that you help that student through the process that making progress involves.

I have come to think of this process as involving five steps:

Morphology: knowing what the paradigms are

Vocabulary:	knowing the morphology of the specific words of the passage
Syntax:	knowing the functions of this morphology in this specific context
Translation:	accurately expressing the morphology and function of these specific words
Interpretation:	assessing the significance of these specific words in their context

As a rookie teacher, my questions usually started more at the end of the process, but now I try to ask questions from the beginning until I can determine where the difficulties are. My ultimate goal is still the same, namely that my students – reading from left to right – be able to comprehend a Latin sentence with precision and to appreciate the art of its construction. But this is a goal that requires training, and it does not happen all at once.

Thus I begin my course in the fall with a thorough morphology review. You might think of this as student conditioning. Latin muscles, like any other, need repetitive exercise to build strength, and swimming requires you to use all your muscles together. My conditioning comes in the form of daily quizzes for about five weeks, at the end of which they have been given little choice but to have mastered the ability to identify a form in the abstract. For verbs, I establish a verb as paradigmatic for each conjugation, and expect them to be able to identify in full any form of that verb. I build to this in stages, first focusing on all tenses of the indicative active and passive, then adding infinitives, then subjunctives. I convince them through brute repetition that if one knows a verb's principal parts, then every form of that verb is predictable and identifiable.

Sample Verb Morphology Quiz

Identify each of the following indicative verb forms by person, number, tense, voice, mood, then translate each form into English. The full dictionary entries of the verbs are:

laudo, laudare, laudavi, laudatus (to praise)
cupio, cupere, cupivi, cupitus (to desire)
video, videre, vidi, visus (to see)
munio, munire, munivi, munitus (to fortify)

1) cupiant
2) videmur
3) laudatus essem
4) cuperemus
5) munitum erat
6) visae estis
7) muniverint
8) laudatus esse
9) cupietur
10) laudabunt

Nouns and adjectives get a similar treatment, in which I again establish paradigmatic nouns for each declension and adjectives of each type, and we review through model sentences the different functions of each case.

Sample Adjective-Noun Morphology Quiz (within an identified set of vocabulary items)

Identify the case and number of each of the following (list all possible correct answers):

1) bonae res
2) magnis fluminibus
3) miserae nocti
4) vetus urbs
5) bone dux
6) magna urbe
7) veterum virtutum
8) miseri ignes
9) bonos fructus
10) veteris rei

The whole first month of the class we read only sample sentences and no connected text. This month is solely devoted to conditioning. I know that a month of class time is a lot of time, with high opportunity cost. That is a month of reading Latin literature that has been missed. But if I have been successful, then the students have come to respect that in order to read Latin well, they need to be able to process – simultaneously from the morphology of any given word – what type

of word it is, what form it has, and what function of that word is suggested by its form. If these reflexes are now ingrained, then the student will not be afraid to swim amidst the currents of an extended passage. The conditioning will pay off.

Consider two sample passages, both from *Gallic War* I.8. I present these to the class as rivers, and I warm them up to swim them. But I stress that the swimming is tiring, so we want to break up the job into manageable units and then swim each one in turn. Hence we will spend class time working out where those units fall, and we will chunk up the text, as follows:

I.8.1: *Interea ea legione, quam secum habebat, militibusque, qui ex provincia convenerant, a lacu Lemanno, qui in flumen Rhodanum influit, ad montem Iuram, qui fines Sequanorum ab Helvetiis dividit, milia passuum XVIIII murum in altitudinem pedum sedecim fossamque perducit.*

[Meanwhile, with that legion which he had with him and those soldiers whom he had gathered from the province, (Caesar) extended a wall and a ditch of 16 feet in height over the 19 miles from Lake Lemannus, which flows into the Rhone River, to the Jura Mountains, which divides the territories of the Sequani from those of the Helvetii.]

Interea ea legione,
    quam secum habebat,
militibusque,
    qui ex provincia convenerant,
a lacu Lemanno,
    qui in flumen Rhodanum influit,
ad montem Iuram,
    qui fines Sequanorum ab Helvetiis dividit,
milia passuum XVIIII
murum in altitudinem pedum sedecim fossamque
perducit.

Once the students break down this sentence, then its structure clearly emerges. It consists of a series of phrases that have relative clauses interspersed between them. And in fact, once each member of that series is navigated, then one has already nearly made it to the far bank, especially since the sentence closes with the information that is easiest to process, namely the direct object and the main verb. Hence this is a sentence where the month spent training should be recognized as paying off, as students can feel for themselves that the length of the sentence is no obstacle at all to its clarity.

My second example, drawn from the same paragraph in Caesar, is more challenging, for it involves a whole series of participles, and thus describes a series of actions. Participles are the most challenging words in Latin for intermediate students, for they look like adjectives but function like verbs. They govern whole clauses but are embedded within them. Participles demand a lot of your attention. In this example, the Helvetians are trying to cross the river despite the defensive wall on the far side of it that Caesar has just constructed. Their efforts are all conveyed through participles, and class time needs to be spent to single each one out in order to comprehend the action it describes.

I.8.4: *Helvetii, navibus iunctis ratibusque compluribus factis, alii vadis Rhodani, qua minima altitudo fluminis erat, non numquam interdiu, saepius noctu, si perrumpere possent, conati, operis munitione et militum concursu et telis repulsi, hoc conatu destiterunt*.

Helvetii,	[The Helvetians,
navibus iunctis	(some) having joined boats together
ratibusque compluribus factis,	and made a number of rafts,
alii vadis Rhodani,	others at the fords of the Rhone,
qua minima altitudo fluminis erat,	where the depth of the river was lowest,
non numquam interdiu, saepius noctu,	sometimes by day, more often by night,
si perrumpere possent conati,	having tested if they could burst through,
operis munitione	by the fortification of the work
et militum concursu	and by the massing of the soldiers
et telis	and by their missiles
repulsi,	having been forced back,
hoc conatu destiterunt.	they desisted from the attempt.]

First, then, we learn that some Helvetians – in an ablative absolute – are making rafts with which to cross the river. But others – in the nominative – are trying to cross on foot where the river is fordable. We learn where they do it and when. But this is choppy current, because this information is not absolutely necessary, thus it just makes the river wider. Stress your students' conditioning and keep them going. We then learn the Helvetians' purpose, but it comes as hard swimming: a deponent participle introducing an indirect question: *si perrumpere possent conati*. Here you will see which students have enough conditioning. (If they struggle, focus on each syntactic chunk, and then – for the trouble spots – each word of each chunk.) But once you make it past this hard phrase, then a lighter patch: a series of ablatives capped by *repulsi*. Their repulse thus answers their attempt, and we now understand that the Helvetian efforts have failed. If our conditioning has been sufficient, therefore, the final (and main) clause of the sentence is almost self-evident: *hoc conatu destiterunt*, 'they desisted from the attempt.'

The Helvetians, then, could not make it across the river, but the question for you is whether your students could make it through the river that is this sentence. If they did, then it is worth your time to pivot to questions of style. How did we swim it, what choices did the river make for us, where was it hard to keep up our stroke? Why would Caesar have designed this sentence to make us work so hard? One valuable way of answering is to map the messiness of the sentence onto the Helvetians' own efforts. The main clause of the sentence is simple – the Helvetians gave up their attempt – but the bulk of the sentence captures the flurry of disorganized action by which they made the attempt, a flurry captured through the seemingly disorganized syntax of the sentence.

Compare the ordering of the previous example (I.8.1), in which Caesar built a wall nineteen miles in length with a rhythmic use of phrasing that made the achievement fall into place just like the syntax of his sentence. These sentences are different kinds of rivers. They make you swim in different ways, or, better, they make you think about your swimming in different ways. The Latin swimmer who has this epiphany, who can sense how Caesar is controlling how his reader navigates his sentences, that student is now ready to swim the Mississippi.