

Cultivating Translation Skills in Intermediate and Advanced Latin Classes

Most students who learn Latin develop a rhythm of memorizing forms, paradigms, and vocabulary and eventually consider themselves masters of *hic haec hoc* or the forms of the imperfect passive subjunctive. We teach them our tricks: paper or electronic flashcards, setting endings to familiar tunes, or practice, practice, practice! Memorization, while not easy for some, often leads to concrete results, especially when we emphasize precise knowledge of endings in our early assessments of students' progress in the language. Many beginning Latin courses are structured around exercises where there are right and wrong answers, and the learning does not require any higher order thinking. Students are asked to identify the case of *canem*— the tense of *amabamus*, or the mood of *imperavissent*; and they see these forms in very short, formulaic sentences that center around the grammatical topic under discussion.

Understanding the syntax of Latin, however, requires an entirely different set of skills which goes beyond the application of a student's knowledge of forms and vocabulary. Students have to recognize, for example, that while, yes, an accusative plus an infinitive is an indirect statement, such a clause has meaning within the structure of a sentence. More importantly, indirect statements rarely occur in isolation; they appear amid a flurry of other forms and suddenly we are asking the students to use at once knowledge that they often learned as discrete units. Constructions such as indirect statement become even more daunting when they are imbedded in a full-paragraph sentence of Caesar or Cicero!

Translating Latin passages into idiomatic English is one way to assess whether students can draw upon multiple skills—vocabulary, forms, and syntax—at the same time, and, in doing so, takes their thinking to another level. A translation is an original creation, as students have to formulate English sentences that accurately recreate the meaning of complex Latin constructions.

This is true even of the “literal translations” required on a number of standardized tests, such as the AP Latin Examination and the CAMWS translation exam.

In this workshop, the presenters will offer a variety of strategies for helping students comprehend some of the most problematic constructions in Latin (e.g., ablative absolutes, indirect statements, expressions of purpose) in a way that will improve their translation skills. Participants will work through short sample passages of Caesar and Vergil and discuss different strategies for translating these passages in class with students rather than expecting the students to arrive in class with perfect translations. These exercises will show how translating is still an effective measure of students’ knowledge of Latin and a fun way to show the beauty of the language. The presenters will also suggest how to create assessments that evaluate the higher order thinking that translation entails.

By no means should translation be the only skill we teach and assess in our intermediate and advanced classes, but a fresh look at this timeworn tool can facilitate greater understanding of the complex Latin passages that often frustrate even our most talented students.