Mutatis Mutandis, Quo Vadimus?

In the last fifteen years, there has been increasing interest across the United States and parts of Europe in returning to teaching Latin actively, that is using all four language skills— listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and in moving away from strict adherence to grammatical analysis and translation. Such an approach generally focuses on communicative activities in the classroom, and delays the introduction of metalinguistic information until after the acquisition of forms and functions. This pedagogical shift brings Latin instruction in line with the results of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research that has much to say about the distinction between explicit and implicit knowledge of a language, the importance of lexis, the mechanisms of language processing, and the skills required for fluid reading.

Despite the significant increase in the use of Active Latin (AL) in middle and high schools across the country, AL is not yet the prevailing approach to Latin instruction. Many schools and most universities continue to teach Latin using the grammar-translation approach or some modification of it. Regardless of methodology, the ultimate goal of most Latin programs remains the same – to train proficient readers, but the divergence of approaches, particularly between K-12 and higher educational settings, has created a new threat to the survival of Latin programs. The lack of articulation between secondary and tertiary programs sets up students, particularly those coming from schools where Latin is taught actively, for disappointment or failure rather than success. If their college-level courses have different expectations than the high school classes in which they were successful, students are quite likely to abandon the study of Latin, particularly if they are unsupported in making the transition and if the skills they have already acquired are not recognized.

This paper begins with a brief discussion of the SLA research findings that are most relevant to the Latin classroom, focusing particularly on work that pertains to the acquisition of vocabulary (Laufer, Keating), reading fluency (Harwood, Pellicer-Sánchez), grammatical instruction (Ellis, Van Patten), and effective assessment (Lantolf). It then considers the ways in which these findings are reflected in the changing pedagogy of Latin classrooms at all levels, citing specific examples from classrooms of teachers trained in the instructional use of AL, whose methods include: a multi-sensory approach to the teaching of vocabulary; the use of TPR and TPRS; the sheltering of vocabulary; interactive classroom exercises conducted in Latin only; the co-creation (students and teacher) of Latin stories; and specific instruction both for complex grammatical structures and for reading strategies. While the efficacy of such AL methods has not yet been formally investigated, it does appear to be reflected in program growth, student retention, and student success (as measured by standardized exams such as NLE and ALIRA) in many of the schools where it is employed.

Finally, the paper will consider the challenges presented by the lack of articulation among Latin programs K-16 (and beyond), and it will offer both specific strategies for supporting students coming into programs whose pedagogy differs from that of their previous classroom experience and some concrete suggestions for better K-16 coordination.

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