On Learning (and Teaching) Latin Verbs

Research on second language acquisition has shown many things about how learners

learn verbs. Many of these findings have been shown to apply across different languages (Ortega

2009). How verbs are often presented in Latin textbooks sometimes differs from what we now

know about the process of second language acquisition of tenses. This presentation will review

the findings and how they apply to teaching Latin verbs and will suggest how textbooks can be

adapted and supplemented to make student learning of verbs and the Latin temporal system more

effective.

Authentic contexts, including lexical adverbs, word order, and characteristic

constructions, are important in constructing the temporal system of a language, of which verb

tense is a part. Learners first assume that material is presented in chronological order. The next

stage in development employs lexical (e.g. adverbs such as *tum*, *mox*) and other markers to

interpret time. Learning and using the morphology itself of the verb is the last stage in the

process (Bardovi-Harlig 2000). Languages use all three means, in different proportions and

different ways, to express time, aspect, and temporal relationships. Since in Latin the verb

generally occurs at the end of the clause, Latin relies proportionately more on lexical aids, word

order, and characteristic contexts to prepare the reader for changes in time (and mood). This

presentation demonstrates some of these markers to help teachers evaluate and provide authentic

examples for students so that they may learn to predict and read tense forms in Latin. For

example, pluperfect verbs are often in relative clauses or are predicted by a "nam" sentence

starter.

It also makes a difference in which order tenses are presented for learning and which

verbs are used for each tense. Learning the morphological form itself is not the same as learning

the tense concept. Students can learn grammatical forms, such as the imperfect, without really understanding the functional tense concept. There is a natural progression in tense acquisition. Of the past tenses, the simple (preterite) past is acquired first, then the imperfect, then the present perfect, then the pluperfect (Bardovi-Harlig 2000). The temporal system is revised and constructed as new tenses are learned. If a different past tense other than simple past is taught first, it tends to be associated with the default concept of simple past. This explains the tendency of students to translate imperfects as a simple past, "___ed," if the imperfect is the first past tense they learn.

There is also a relationship between the tense aspect and the semantic concept of the verb. Verbs can be classed as expressing states, activities, accomplishments and achievements. When acquiring each tense, learners progress through the different categories of verbs. There is a different order of acquisition for the different tenses because of their different aspect nature. For example, for perfects, i.e. simple past, the first association is with verbs expressing achievements, then accomplishments, then activities, and then states (Bardovi-Harlig 2000). If the semantic class of the verbs first used to teach a tense does not match the aspect of the tense, the mismatch can impede rather than maximize student understanding of the form.

Given that there are fewer grammatical tense forms in Latin than in English, as Wigtil (1992) notes, it is difficult for students to learn multiple English translations for each form. Andersen has shown that learners follow a one to one principle: one form equals one translation (Andersen 1984). Only later can learners acquire the ability to distinguish among multiple interpretations of a single form. Frequency of use and salience can help determine which should be the first one to one correspondence of tense form and translation. The use of authentic or characteristic contexts is important for Latin, which also uses other kinds of markers besides the

verb forms themselves to help clarify, for example, imperfective vs. progressive (Baldi and Cuzzolin 2009).

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