Learning Vergil with Little Data

In this panel, I will present the preliminary results of my incipient efforts to generate

quantitative and qualitative data about the learning of a small number of fourth semester,

Intermediate Latin students reading selections from Vergil's *Aeneid*. After different groupings

of the anticipated twenty students have access to different preparatory materials within our

university's learning management software, all the students will complete common assessments.

Then, with the help of some friendly social scientists on campus, I hope to find some meaningful

results regarding which preparatory methods best helped students succeed in understanding

Vergil, as demonstrated by their performance on the assessments. For qualitative measures,

students will complete a survey about their experience of preparation and performance. For

quantitative measures, the data about completion of the preparatory exercises will be correlated

with data from assessment to see if it might imply causation.

I hypothesize, if I may, that if students spend focused time on relevant vocabulary

acquisition and on simplified versions of the authentic text, then they will improve their ability to

comprehend genuine Vergil.

I am trying this because I desperately want these students to encounter the beauty and

power of the poetry, but I know that the complexities of Latin and the motivation of students

threaten to transform Vergil's epic into a forced march. I want to equip the students with the

best possible tools for meeting Vergil on his terms, and I need the students to spend

meaningfully effective time outside of our classroom sessions in order to enable fruitful reading

and discussion when we assemble. I have scoured the pedagogical papers in *Teaching Classical*

Languages and other academic journals, where I have found many helpful anecdotes about

strategies and activities to promote success in Intermediate Latin. I have found, however, limited

hard evidence connecting how students study outside of the class to their progress in comprehending a sophisticated Latin text, an exception being the qualitative results in Albright 2013. So I will try to find this evidence, and I invite others to join me in this journey—and to show me the way.

The key questions for this project concern how to prepare students to understand Vergil's poetry and how to assess student understanding of the Latin text. Sending students back to the dormitories for traditional translation assignments, with the tag-team wrestling matches against syntax and the dictionary, poses two problems. First, the beauty and power of Vergil's language is reduced to the closest English approximation. Second, the incentive becomes knowing the English so well that any Latin can be recognized and then ignored: hence the numerous AP students who translated lines 1-10 of Catullus 13 when the exam presented them with lines 6-14 (McFadden 2008: 2). Instead, I want to leverage the principles of language acquisition (Carlon 2013), hence my hypothesis that additional work with vocabulary and with embedded readings (Patrick; Toda) can encourage meaningful understanding of complex Latin. Students will, therefore, be assigned in rotation to particular digital exercises on relevant vocabulary and on simplified versions of the assigned text. Correlation with the common assessment, when controlled for student characteristics, will reveal if I've identified a useful learning strategy for Latin students.

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