

Testing in a College Language Classroom

Regular tests and quizzes are part of any elementary or intermediate Latin or Greek class. Most instructors impose quizzes at least weekly if not more frequently. Quizzes often include basic recall of memorized items, such as morphemes of nouns or verbs or Latin-to-English vocabulary. Quizzes may include sentences so that students can be asked to recognize forms (e.g. “identify the direct object”), or ask the grammatical function of a particular word (e.g. “what is the function of <word> in the sentence?”), and thereby display their comprehension of the use and function of parts of the sentence. By their nature, quizzes are brief and can be graded and returned quickly, providing instructors with frequent evaluation of each student’s learning of forms. Quizzes serve to provide students with a real-time diagnostic of how well they are memorizing the required elements of Latin or Greek, and they provide students with incentive (or one might say an imperative) to study regularly.

Tests (or exams), which are generally spaced more broadly across a semester, often focus on the application of lower-level learning (i.e. memorization of forms and vocabulary) and ask students to translate entire sentences or paragraphs. At the elementary level, the passages for translation are unseen; at the intermediate level, they may also include original Latin studied in class. Tests may also ask questions to demonstrate reading comprehension. Some instructors will also incorporate recall items that students have learned previously.

The methods of testing knowledge in college Latin or Greek classes has remained largely unchanged for centuries; the introduction of computerized tests has not changed the basic format or methodology of assessing memorization or application, nor has the development and application of different classroom pedagogies. Exam and quiz grades often make up the bulk of a grade in a college Latin or Greek course grade, and so the stakes for a particular student are high.

Furthermore, research shows that students who are tested regularly have much greater chances of having a positive learning outcome and that students prefer traditional testing, i.e. tests administered in a classroom setting with time limits and testing security (Chukwudi Ikwueze 2014).

It therefore stands to reason that we should consider whether our methods of testing student knowledge in language classes are appropriate and fair in light of research on language acquisition and cognition, whether traditional pen-and-paper testing yields different results than computerized testing, and indeed whether memorization (which is the bulk of what we assess) should remain a requirement when students can so easily access information. Furthermore, now that all college programs are required to assess student outcomes, it is valuable for the assessment of student learning in each class can be aligned with program assessment.

Classicists have done very little research on assessment specific to ancient languages, whereas there is an enormous body of research on the testing of spoken languages (Davies 2014). Much of this research can inform a discussion of the testing of classical languages, as can research on testing in other fields, especially concerning the process and testing of memorization. In this talk I will also suggest that testing of student knowledge within a class can be designed in such a way as to facilitate quantitative research on classical language learning that is desperately needed in our field.

Bibliography

- Chukwudi Ikwueze, L. "Do Exam Policies Matter in College?" *Creative Education* 5 (2014): 177-84.
- Davies, A. "Fifty Years of Language Testing". In Kunnan, A. J. (Ed.) *The Companion to Language Assessment* London 2014, 1-21.

