

World Languages in the Latin Classroom

Where I teach, many students start learning Latin to avoid learning another language—and sometimes precisely because they don't care to learn about “another culture”. But Latin does fulfill a university distribution requirement that requires them, among other things, to become more aware of cultural diversity. How then to make sure they are gaining that awareness? Students who avoid language learning often also have novice metalinguistic skills (skills for thinking about how language works), and this hampers their Latin learning, and their ability to transfer what they've learned in a Latin course to other areas of thought. This paper describes one strategy I have developed to try and help Latin students gain metalinguistic skills, and an awareness of the word's linguistic diversity.

My strategy uses in-class or take-home activities to introduce Latin students to unfamiliar languages. These guided encounters provide students with a brief text in a non-Latin language, linguist-style interlinear glosses, and one or more questions to answer on the basis of this information. The exercise might draw a student's attention to a feature Latin shares with another language (for instance, an ablative case in Tamil) or it may point out that the Latin way of doing things is not the only way (e.g. “instruments” and “accompaniments” are separated into different cases in some Australian languages). Through these exercises, students become more aware of how wide the options for expressing oneself are around the world, and they connect their Latin knowledge into a wider understanding of how human beings talk and think.

Predictably, some students take to this, others do not, but qualitative assessment of students in my recent Latin cohorts shows that in general these exercises help students develop inductive reading strategies, understand grammatical descriptions of Latin, and articulate why someone might study a language beyond their first. Some students who expressed little interest

in classical culture made marked gains in this last area. These were students who engaged little with strategies that many teachers use to justify introductory Latin classes as genuine cultural encounters, such as graded readings in Roman culture, excerpts from Latin literature, and spoken Latin. Exercises with world languages may then be a useful tool for engaging students who take Latin with some reluctance.

However, improvements with this group of students were not universal. Among several factors at play may be students' ideological commitments. Some students have very little personal interest in the Romans, but are still committed to the worth of Latin as a "foundation of Western civilization". Some of these students reject the subtle post-colonial message that comes from situating Latin among Xhosa, Nuu-chah-nulth, and Diné, and resist doing the associated exercises. A teacher who wants to use these ideas, then, has to decide how important it is for their students' own learning goals to discuss the politics of linguistic diversity in class.