

How the Revised Standards for Classical Language Learning Help Beginning Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Beginning teachers face many challenges, not least of which is the development of an effective plan for instruction. The revised *Standards for Classical Language Learning* help beginning instructors situate their language instruction into an effective context, such as is detailed in the Standards' five goals of Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. Furthermore, the revised Standards offer numerous meaningful examples of students' performance abilities at different levels, and flexibility in the design of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. By consulting the revised Standards, beginning teachers can develop more effective and nuanced methods of classical language teaching.

KEYWORDS

Standards, new teachers, context, Latin, *EdTPA*

Graduate students and pre-service teachers who are studying and working to become effective instructors of classical languages face many challenges. These become vividly apparent once the teaching candidate actually enters the workforce and begins teaching students, whether the candidate is a student teacher working with a cooperating teacher, or whether he or she is teaching solo. To give one example, a candidate may have to decide whether to follow a grammar-translation method, a reading method, a method that makes extensive use of active Latin or Greek in the classroom, or some combination of all three. The possibilities and resulting permutations of any teaching strategy suddenly become very real as one actually begins to teach ancient Greek or Latin. Candidates will have to ask themselves the question, "What will I actually have my students *do* when they are in class, or for that matter, outside of class? Will they just listen to me speak and in this way learn the language, or will I have them read, speak, or write, or all of the above? And will it be in Latin or Greek, or in English?" Beginning teachers face the task of changing their perspective from that of student of the classical language, to that of instructor, and this

change of perspective can force candidates to reevaluate what they have learned, how they have learned it, and, in turn, how they would have others learn in the best possible fashion as he or she begins to teach.

In my role as a mentor to beginning teachers of Latin who are completing a Master's in Latin Education at Hunter College in New York City, I have found that candidates often struggle with exactly these types of questions, and that their recent experience as a graduate student of Latin or Classics may make it difficult for them to think about how students at the elementary, middle school, or high school levels actually learn, or could learn, an ancient language such as Latin. Often candidates believe that the ultimate aim is for students to be able to translate effectively Virgil, Caesar, or other Latin authors of the classical canon into English. This type of viewpoint may limit the instructional approaches that the beginning teacher can adopt, with the result that not all students effectively understand the material at hand. Such an approach may lead students to have a skewed or incomplete grasp of what they are actually learning. Beginning teachers need to learn to adopt a wider instructional approach, one that can be effective for students of various learning styles and levels of maturity.

An essential point that beginning teachers must grasp is one of context - that is, how students can understand and incorporate the new material that they are studying in a context, both cultural and linguistic, that is meaningful and, consequently, useful for students, both during class and later, as they apply what they have learned to other contexts, classical or otherwise. The word *context*, from the Latin verb *con-texto*, suggests weaving things together, which is what learning is often about, that is, making connections between disparate elements of information, so that a larger picture may become clear. If candidates cannot explain, and students cannot grasp, the overall context of what is being studied, the learning process may be limited in terms of what students can understand and how they can apply their new knowledge.

As it happens, the revised *Standards for Classical Language Learning* help beginning teachers think about this very issue of context. The five goals of Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities (note that 4 of 5 have the *com-* or *con-* prefix) are clear and explicit about putting language learning in a meaningful context. Here we find, as the Standards document notes, a shift away from thinking about reading, listening to, speaking, and writing the target language as discrete and distinct functions, and instead a stronger embrace of what cultural or communicative learning entails (7). Indeed I find in the Standards document an

effective argument about language learning and culture. “In reality, the true content of a language course or program is not discrete elements of grammar and vocabulary, but rather the cultures expressed through the language” (30). This more holistic approach can help beginning teachers think about how to round out and enhance classical language teaching. Furthermore, the revised Standards break down the Communications goal into three modes, namely the Interpretive, Interpersonal, and Presentational. This innovation, not found in the earlier Standards, has at least three benefits: first, it encourages teachers to consider that interpreting texts or spoken words is only one part of the language learning process; second, it encourages teachers to design cooperative learning activities, and to consider the benefits of project-based learning, both of which are covered, in part, by the interpersonal and presentational modes, respectively; and third, it reflects the important move in current classical language pedagogy towards greater active use of the target language in the classroom, since the basis of the interpersonal and presentational modes in the revised Standards is the use of Latin or Greek for communication by the students themselves. Thus the revised Standards encourage a fuller, more meaningful classical language learning experience for students.

Allow me to use my own experiences as a beginning teacher as an example of how the revised Standards can suggest more effective teaching. In my second year of high school teaching, I attempted to teach the Latin future tense in one and a half lessons, without any development of context, or diversification of activities, for students to understand the new material; I simply presented the new language forms and explained how to translate them. The following week, I was surprised to hear from the students’ own mouths that they had not grasped the future tense in any meaningful way. Through the Standards’ development of the three modes of communication, we can see how students should not just be limited to, say, identifying future tense forms, but that they should also be generating communication according to interpersonal and presentational models; this is not an afterthought, but rather part of the learning process. On the topic of the future tense, I learned to have students read about Latin astrological signs and read and create Latin future-tense predictions about themselves and others. Students of the same astrological sign were able to share their insights about themselves, and were also free to question the validity of astrology, based on their different viewpoints and cultural backgrounds. They were able to make connections, and also see differences, between ancient and modern beliefs regarding astrology, and they could compare the modern use of the Latin

astrological signs in spoken English to their actual meanings in Latin. Furthermore, they were able to present their findings, in Latin, including future tense forms, to the rest of the class. In this way, students were developing their knowledge of both language forms as well as functions in a meaningful cultural construct, such as the Standards detail in the performance descriptors.

Similarly, when I observe beginning teachers approach language from a relatively cut-and-dried grammatical approach, I help them see how this may limit the learning experience of their students. For example, teaching the genitive case in Latin can be enhanced by description of the Latin family and family relationships, so that students see how the genitive works in a genuine and significant cultural scenario. In the past, I have had students make a family tree for themselves (real or imaginary), using the Latin words for different family relations, and including sentences with genitive case nouns to express some of the relationships within their family. Such an activity could also have an aural/oral component, in line with the interpersonal and presentational modes, in which students ask and answer questions containing genitive case nouns based on a given family tree. To give another example, if students are studying the dative case and the perfect tense, it makes perfect sense to incorporate ancient Latin memorial and dedicatory inscriptions, which very often explain that someone made (in the perfect tense) a monument for a particular person or god (in the dative case). In this way, students can see and interact with how these linguistic items operate in an engaging and meaningful scenario.

Furthermore, the Standards explain how students can make meaningful connections between their own lives or the modern world and the ancient world of Latin or Greek, and again, this is not an afterthought. To continue the previous example, instead of having students only study ancient Latin memorial inscriptions, they can also create new ones, for their own loved ones, pets, or for people from the modern world, and they will retain more and learn more deeply by doing so. The Standards document also includes a helpful list of examples of how teachers might help students draw connections between their classical language study and the other subjects they are studying, such as mathematics, music, art, and English (39). In terms of the Comparisons standard, beginning teachers quickly learn that having students compare words and structures in the target language to their own native language, or to other languages they may be studying, is one of the strongest ways they can help students own the material. On the Communities standard, the document notes that Communities are in fact the ultimate rationale for learning as learners are prepared

to “participate effectively in communities, both at home and across the globe” (54). So also the beginning teacher comes to understand that whatever he or she can do to expand the focus on and interest in the material beyond the classroom will benefit the students, will make the class itself more meaningful, and will also enhance the school’s classical language program.

I should also note that such emphasis on cultural elements within lessons and units is not only beneficial in itself; it can also help teacher candidates meet the requirements of exams they may need to pass, such as the new *edTPA* exam from Pearson Education, which some states have incorporated into their teacher training requirements. The *edTPA* exam is a performance-based assessment in which candidates must document their planning, instruction, and assessment over an actual learning segment of approximately 3-5 lessons. For the classical languages version of the *edTPA*, the candidate must display that s/he helped students develop “communicative proficiency in the classical language in meaningful cultural contexts.” This means that, in order to succeed on the exam, the candidate must incorporate significant cultural components within their language teaching, ones that make connections between the culture of the ancient Greeks or Romans and the modern culture in which the students participate.



Fig. 1: Cultures Framework
(revised Standards for Classical Language Learning)

This requirement is in line with the goal areas of Cultures and Connections within the revised Standards. Furthermore, the Standards document, in discussing the Cultures goal, describes the interplay between the practices, products and perspectives of ancient cultures and those of modern cultures; a helpful diagram is included (Fig. 1). This same cultural issue is at the heart of rubric 8, Deepening

Student Learning, on the classical languages *edTPA* exam. Because exams such as the *edTPA* require candidates to specifically relate the language forms that they are teaching to the higher functions of the language, and to do so in meaningful cultural contexts, the revised Standards can help candidates envision approaches and activities for students that would be appropriate at different proficiency levels.

At the same time, the revised Standards offer a large degree of flexibility in terms of how a teacher might achieve the stated goals. This flexibility is appropriate for 21st century classical language education, which may take place in many different learning scenarios and with students of very different ages. Included are performance descriptors not only for students in middle school, high school, and college, but also for pre-K to 5th grade students as well as lifelong learners. Also, within each of the three levels of Novice, Intermediate, and Advanced in the performance descriptors, there are three further subdivisions of Low, Middle, and High levels, so that students may attain a certain proficiency level according to various criteria. These distinctions within proficiency levels again are appropriate, given the different learning styles of various learners and the various approaches that different classical language instructors take. The document acknowledges that some instructors may incorporate a great deal of active Latin/Greek in the classroom, and others much less, and that this might result in a different progression, especially in the Interpersonal and Presentational modes, to such an extent that a student with little practice in active Latin or Greek might never progress beyond Novice Low in the Interpersonal mode (2, 4, and 8). At the same time, the revised Standards carefully describe different performance levels in the Interpersonal mode; this is a greatly needed resource, given the growing use of active Latin and Greek in today's classical language classrooms (16-18).

The flexibility that the revised Standards offer is, in a sense, in line with the various approaches that are delineated in each of the five goal areas. Just as there are diverse groups of learners and different focuses of teaching, so also is there diversity in the ways a classical language can and should be approached. In my role as mentor, I encourage Latin teaching candidates to touch upon the various connections, cultures, comparisons, and communities - the "C" words - in every lesson that they teach, if only briefly. Luckily, these are the very items that are detailed and justified in the revised *Standards for Classical Language Learning* document. By consulting these revised Standards, beginning teachers can effectively devise and indeed justify their lesson plans and units as they go forward.

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