

Why Oral Latin?

Susan Thornton Rasmussen
The Paideia Institute

ABSTRACT

Should all students and scholars of Latin use an oral approach? This increasingly common question is important as we consider whether we as teachers are utilizing the best possible methods for our purpose—whether that purpose be overall linguistic competence, or strictly the ability to read canonical texts. Five motivations for the use of oral Latin by teachers and students of any level are described: deepening the understanding of Latin, developing fluency in reading, offering variety for students of different learning styles, historical success of the method, and motivating learners. This paper delineates these motivations and explores to what extent oral Latin is effective for each.

KEYWORDS

spoken Latin, benefits of oral Latin, reasons for oral Latin

The question of whether all students and scholars of Latin should use an oral approach has become increasingly prevalent throughout recent years, and pertains to all learners and instructors of Latin. It is important to consider whether we as teachers are utilizing the best possible methods for our purpose—whether that purpose be overall linguistic competence, or strictly the ability to read canonical texts. Although none of them are necessarily incompatible, there seem to be at least five distinct motivations, or reasons, for the use of oral Latin by teachers and students of any level. By “oral Latin” I mean anything from the spectrum of communicative activities, categorized here according to the [World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages](#). These Standards use three categories to determine competency in the broader goal of communication, both spoken and written: interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational communication. A type of interpersonal communication, for instance, would be natural conversation, where students can make exchanges freely on any subject, or teacher-directed oral drills, where students create and compose responses. Interpretive communication, on the other hand, describes aural comprehension, where learners “understand, interpret, and analyze” Latin words and discourse when heard.

Presentational communication involves activities, where students report information, discuss assigned topics, or narrate a story or event.

1) The first and perhaps most widespread reason for the incorporation of an oral component into any language classroom is in order to attain as complete a comprehension of the language as possible. When a person desires to work to a deep understanding and knowledge of a language, they need to cultivate all aspects of that language. If a person can only read or perhaps write in that language, it certainly cannot be said that they have mastered it in its entirety. This is particularly evident in many modern language classes; students must come to master the language not only by listening and reading, but also by speaking and writing ([National Standards for Foreign Language Learning](#)). It is because of this that the [Standards for Classical Language Learning](#) recommend that students of Latin and Greek also speak, hear, read, and write when learning either language (8).

While the reasons one wishes to learn Latin in the first place vary from person to person, the reason why many already use some sort of oral approach is that it is proven to be effective and efficient in developing linguistic competence as a whole (Richards and Rodgers 36). Language students of communicative approaches demonstrate a familiarity and knowledge of the more subtle distinctions of the language when they speak it, which demands immediate production. According to the results of a study evaluated by Lightbown and Spada, “second language programmes that focus only on accuracy and form do not give students sufficient opportunity to develop communication abilities in a second language” (158-159). Even when one’s goal is solely the ability to read and translate Latin texts fluently, developing communication abilities is vital to building these skills—a reader engages with the author in a communicative way in order to understand and interpret correctly the author’s meaning. An understanding of subtle and nuanced writing can best be learned by developing communication skills. There is current and increasing research and evidence that producing output can facilitate development of a second language: “Output has a number of functions, including promoting automatization, pushing learners to notice gaps in their L2 [second language] knowledge, encouraging them to process syntactically rather than just semantically, and providing opportunities for them to test hypotheses they have constructed about the target language” (Mackey and Abbuhl 218, summarizing Swain).

Although it requires extra time and effort to incorporate a speaking component into a curriculum, the ‘short-cut’ method alone, known as the ‘grammar-

translation' method, has shown itself to be bankrupt in the goal of overall linguistic competence: students (as well as teachers, perhaps) are often unable to read Latin proficiently outside of a very narrow range of (two or three) authors; thus, if our end is to teach them the language as a whole, or even just to read more broadly, an oral component is necessary. The grammar-translation method predominantly trains students to develop only one principal skill—that of reading—while ignoring the development of skills such as writing or speaking. It limits the purpose of language learning to literary fluency and the ability to translate from the target language into the first language. While this is arguably the worthiest and most essential goal of learning a dead language, it can best be accomplished by means of fluency in the language as a whole. Furthermore, as an effect of the grammar-translation approach, the culture of the target language—whether explicitly or implicitly—is viewed as consisting solely of literature and fine arts (Larsen-Freeman 17-18).

2) Developing fluency in reading, however, is also a common motivation for the use of oral Latin in the classroom. “We can better teach students to read Latin and understand the cultures of Latinity by having them engage in a combination of speaking, listening, and writing as well as reading” (Coffee 256). There are several ways that oral Latin enhances reading ability. For example, when listening to spoken Latin, the listener’s comprehension must match the speed of the speaker, and requires him to comprehend in Latin word order, so that he must process in chunks rather than single words. All of these skills develop a faster, more capable, and more fluent reader. Another advantage of oral input is that it offers more comprehensible input than is possible from just reading—because, for example, the instructor, or interlocutor, can modify what is said to correspond to the listener’s ability to understand. Considerable research has been done on the value of second-language input—particularly interactionally modified input, where the speaker and listener negotiate for meaning, while the speaker checks for understanding, and adapts and adjusts in real time the level of speech to the learner’s particular stage in their development (Mackey and Abbuhl 207-15).

Not only listening, but speaking in Latin also assists a great deal in developing proficiency in grammar and syntax, as well as in building and reinforcing vocabulary (Gruber-Miller 88; Swain). Conversation necessitates an instinctive and immediate oral comprehension and response formulation in a way that reading alone does not. Although using Latin to speak about daily life forces students to learn some words that may not be useful for reading canonical authors such as Cicero,

Caesar, or Vergil, it still provides them with much needed exercises of the majority of common vocabulary and syntax used both in speech and in reading the greats.

Moreover, this separation from the written language and the spoken language is not specific to Latin: if a lover of Dante takes an introductory Italian course, there are many words of daily usage that he will learn that will be of no use in reading Dante; the diligent student does not disregard those words, but learns them because that is precisely what is meant to “know Italian” or any other language. Finally, although there are some more recent neologisms that are useful when speaking Latin today, even the daily and colloquial vocabulary that is commonly used aids students in reading more broadly, such as Terence or Plautus.

Furthermore, second language learners who are accustomed to speaking that language generally learn and remember grammatical forms and vocabulary better than students who are not, because they are familiar with creating and repeating these words and forms—not to mention the fact that their accuracy and consistency in pronunciation, phrase grouping, and voice inflection is much greater.¹ These skills are especially useful when students try to read more difficult Latin, where they need to be able to understand complex forms and sentences, as well as recall much vocabulary, in order to read such works; indeed, “learning vocabulary is a basic prelude to reading, and oral Latin drills and activities are demonstrably the best way to do that” (Wills 32). Because of this, students who can speak and write Latin read more easily as well as more quickly.

Another important aspect of reading fluency is the proper expression and performance dimension of certain written texts—and oral Latin clearly builds the skills necessary to do this. “Listening and speaking offer students a way to understand Plautus and Catullus, Cicero and Petronius as writers of texts not just to be read, but also to be heard and performed” (Gruber-Miller 88). These important aspects of literature are worthy of consideration, for communication involves more than just grammar, syntax, and word choice. In order to wholly understand what an author is communicating, it is essential to be able to identify certain stylistic devices, for example, that can best be recognized when spoken.

3) A third reason for incorporating oral Latin into the classroom is that it adds variety for a diversity of ages and learning styles—which, as all teachers know, are many. “History repeats itself. It was as a reformer of elementary education that

¹ These are sample progress indicators of Standard 1.2 of the [Standards for Classical Language Learning](#)

Comenius argued for active learning in his *Ianua Linguarum* of 1631: *Omnis lingua usu potius discitur quam praeceptis, id est, audiendo, legendo, relegendo, imitationem manu et lingua temptando quam creberrime*” (Wills 28). Many students have a difficult time learning languages by grammatical analysis only; and, evidently, they learned their first language by a communicative method. Thus, it is counterintuitive to entirely exclude the one method best attested for successful language learning (Wills 32). Furthermore, an oral approach provides another means of teaching and using the language, and thus contributes to the variety necessary for a successful classroom. For example, it is estimated that as few as 10 percent of the students in our classrooms are operation learners—they who would do well with the grammar-translation method—while the rest are comprehension learners, and excel with a method more suited to their learning style (Deagon 33-34). There are many other ways to categorize the multitude of diverse learning styles, such as the contrast between visual and auditory learners. While visual learners process information best through what they see, auditory learners process best through their ears. There is a great deal of research focusing on these learning styles, and the methods that are best suited to them: “Obviously, a reading course, which focuses on the printed word, will appeal most to visual learners. The challenge for the teacher, then, is to assist the auditory types with the reading process, which can be approached in several practical ways” (Hedgcock and Ferris 67). Two of these approaches that are particularly applicable to second language acquisition are reading aloud to students, and encouraging them to discuss aloud what they have read or heard.

4) Many use oral Latin in the classroom simply because of its proven success in history. As Jeffrey Wills explains, “we know that almost all the millions of people who learned Latin in the ancient world did so by an active, oral method” (Wills 31). The tradition whereby teachers teach Latin by speaking and writing as well as reading continued, in one form or another, all the way from antiquity to the twentieth century. It was particularly preserved in Catholic seminaries. Although Latin was no one’s native language in the middle ages, nor in the Renaissance, educated men and women used it actively, as it was the language of the church, scholastics, and law. Thus, the ability to use Latin extemporaneously, both in writing and in speaking, was of great value in those days. The pedagogy of the Society of Jesus, for example, established in the sixteenth century, was an oral method that remained without many changes up until the eighteenth century. Because we are a consortium wishing to draw wisdom from those who have gone before us, we ought

to consider the ways and wisdom not only of the ancients but also of the past two thousand years, especially of the times when classical studies were at their zenith. Persuaded and inspired by the success of the past, many believe that we ought to follow and reinstate the mode of teaching that was maintained for so long in Europe, that produced so many great scholastics in the Renaissance, and that long preceded the “traditional method” of today.

Inspired by its expansive role in the communication of the past, there are some who cultivate and promote an oral use of Latin—particularly a conversational use—for the sake of modern unity, for a common, neutral language, whether between scholars, or among classicists, or throughout the whole world. They think that the Latin works and thoughts passed down throughout the ages should be an anchor, a font of unity in the modern world. As Pope John XXIII wrote, “*suae enim sponte naturae lingua Latina ad provehendum apud populos quoslibet omnem humanitatis cultum est péraccommodata: cum invidiam non commoveat, singulis gentibus se aequabilem praestet, nullius partibus faveat, omnibus postremo sit grata et amica*” (Pope John XXIII 3). Though Latin is not now the first language of any people, some say it should be the sole mode of communication among those who study Latin works, or even among scholars of other disciplines, as it was at the time of Erasmus, for example. One instance of this is seen in the periodical *Vox Latina*, established in 1965, which, self-described, “*ad communicationem internationalem spectat*” (“Description”).

5) The final motivation that I have found among those who use any aspect of oral Latin is simply that it is enjoyable and fosters the joy of learning; indeed, as only those who use it know, it is a language that “is special for each of us who uses it, that no one owns, where the construction of every sentence can have charm, and the use of a half-remembered word or phrase brings a shared pleasure of recognition” (Coffee 269). When they realize it is a possibility, many students request the use of oral—especially conversational—Latin in their classes; they recognize the joy and value of communicating in the language they are learning. They see students of modern languages learning to speak and communicate, and desire to do so themselves. The sense of accomplishment from being able to speak in a second language works to encourage students to progress in their learning. Furthermore, oral Latin excites in students—especially in young children—a greater interest for the language. At a younger age, they are less capable of grasping the complex grammatical and syntactical concepts explained in high school and college language courses.

Many younger students learn better by speaking and listening than they do by reading. Those who are proponents of *Foreign Language Exploratory Courses*, for example, where “children receive paramount benefit not so much from the particular language chosen for instruction, but from the experience and process of learning a language,” utilize oral activities for this very reason: because they are the most effective method for engaging and inspiring younger students. (“FLEX or FLES?”).

CONCLUSION

Hopefully it is clear that whether one desires mastery of the language as a whole or the greatest fluency in reading, or whether they wish to accommodate more learning styles in the classroom or to emulate the success of history, it is necessary to use Latin orally. But perhaps this final motivation will persuade those still struggling to recognize the pedagogical and intellectual benefits of oral Latin: who would not want to speak with the same words, in the same tongue that the most brilliant minds of the past two millennia so eloquently and lucidly used?

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