

An Old Teaching Dog Tries Some New Tricks: Changing a Traditional Latin Classroom

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ABSTRACT

A mid-career classics professor, who has taught beginning Latin with a modified grammar-translation approach for many years, gives an account of how he came to experiment with more active and oral techniques inspired by some of the recent work on Latin and second language acquisition and his preliminary assessment of that experiment.

KEYWORDS

Latin teaching, oral, active, spoken Latin, second language acquisition

After the midterm in the 2nd semester of my beginning Latin course in 2014-2015, I sent out an email to the class proposing the following challenge: “Whoever first correctly answers the following Latin riddle that I have made up (no answer is available on the internet!) will receive an automatic 100 for their midterm grade: *Cur servus serus ad cenam advenit?*” This sent them into a frenzy. More than half of them made a guess, some of them multiple guesses, and in succeeding days they begged for further clues and hints. The only help I gave them was the instruction that they must think in Latin. Translating the riddle into English and coming up with an answer that they translated back into Latin would not work. Four days later I received an email at midnight from a good student, but not the best student in the class, with the correct answer in Latin. I was filled with an unexpected feeling of elation. This student had figured out a difficult riddle and she had done it by thinking in the language!

This was in many ways the culmination of a year of experimentation with a new approach in my first year Latin course. Despite the hard work of my best students, they fall far short of reading proficiency even after four years of continuous study.¹ In this I do not think that my students are unusual. I am a good teacher of

¹ It is not my intention here to explore the concept of “reading proficiency” or discuss whether it should be somewhat different for classical languages than modern languages. ACTFL has recently

Latin with a methodology that straddles a traditional grammar-translation approach and some of the new strategies that have been bubbling up in Latin pedagogy since the 1970s. I use a book that emphasizes an inductive method, but I have my students memorize vocabulary and forms along the way. I have incorporated new pedagogical techniques (more oral work, for example) and new content to stimulate greater interest and learning, but I also test them regularly, with translation of sight passages always as a core component of that testing. It is in the sight passages, for courses at every level, that it becomes apparent that my students cannot read Latin well enough to be regarded as proficient in the way that other language teachers assess proficiency.²

As I contemplated the sort of change that I might make, I knew that I wanted my students to become better at a few, key things. I hoped that they would learn vocabulary more deeply than they had in the past. Despite assigning the words regularly (both Latin to English and English to Latin), quizzing them orally in class and on tests, and having a sight passage as a core component of all my testing, I have found student knowledge of vocabulary to be a critical weakness.

I believe that my students' shaky grasp of too little vocabulary is a central impediment to their becoming truly proficient at reading Latin. Because they are often looking up the meanings of words as they work through a sentence, they never attain enough speed and comprehension to have that success snowball into an even

released new proficiency guidelines and the World Readiness Standards for Learning Languages, and the American Classical League, in conjunction with the Society for Classical Studies and several regional classics organizations, named members to a writing team that has developed a [revised version of those standards](#) adapted to the teaching of Latin and Greek. It is my impression that the speed and accuracy of reading comprehension demonstrated by a highly proficient learner of a modern foreign language far outstrips that of the best Latin and Greek students - and that is not even taking into account that the classics student would need to use a dictionary, grammar, commentary, and even a translation in places. Nowhere have I found reading proficiency guidelines that imagine the use of such aids for a reader rated highly proficient. In my experience, teaching at 4 different colleges and universities, and at the Intercollegiate Center for Classical Studies on 3 separate occasions, very few undergraduates, many of whom have been studying Latin for 7-8 years, can sight read a wide variety of original texts comfortably. Of the 42 students at the Intercollegiate Center for Classical Studies in 2015-2016 to whom I administered an advanced Latin placement exam consisting of a sight passage of Tacitus, I would have rated only 1 of them as highly proficient in his comprehension of the passage.

² Since the 1970's there has been a steady stream of articles and chapters that query how well our students are actually learning to read Latin and offer various remedies. See Gruber-Miller 1998, Kitchell, and Sassenberg for more recent versions of this argument. It is sobering to see an accomplished Latinist like Mary Beard admit to occasional struggles sight reading neo-Latin texts that have never been translated (See http://timesonline.typepad.com/dons_life/2016/08/what-does-the-latin-actually-say.html).

more secure knowledge of vocabulary (and grammar and syntax), which would lead by its own momentum to a greater fluency of reading. In places where they have forgotten the meaning of a word they will often wreak havoc on vocabulary and grammar that they do know in a desperate attempt to make everything work. These challenges with vocabulary are exacerbated at the higher levels of Latin, especially if they do not commit vocabulary securely to memory, because the dominant activity in class is the translation of a usually short and grammatically challenging passage of poetry prepared beforehand with all of the necessary aids on hand.³

I also wanted my students to develop a greater intuitive feel for how the Latin was conveying meaning on a number of different levels. At the level of individual forms, I wanted them to gain an implicit knowledge for the fact that an accusative like *puellam*, for example, would most likely receive the action of the verb or serve as subject of an indirect statement. On the clausal level, both within and between them, they often struggled to see the true meaning. On the one hand this might be a simple case of improving my teaching and their learning of how the grammar and forms are working to convey meaning, but it seemed more than that. Many of them could apply their knowledge of the rules and forms correctly to the Latin, but they tended to move mechanically and slowly, word by word, as they translated and often did not truly comprehend the Latin.

The most interesting new movement in Latin pedagogy is led by those who have applied the theories of second language acquisition to their methods, utilizing Latin orally and extensively in class to teach Latin.⁴ This is not just a greater em-

³ Carlon 2016 reviews the current state of thinking about how memory and the learning of vocabulary works in second language acquisition and she discusses how many of these ideas might be best implemented in a Latin classroom. In general, she advocates for an approach that would include comprehensible input, active use of the vocabulary by the student, and deliberate learning (i.e. memorization), noting that students need to be shown how to memorize vocabulary. My own impression is that few students do as much effective deliberate learning of vocabulary as we imagine or hope. And in classrooms where there is very little comprehensible input or active use of Latin, deliberate learning of vocabulary alone does not put enough words securely into long term memory such that a student can become a highly proficient reader.

⁴ Carlon 2013 is the most persuasive, scientific argument for incorporating into the teaching of Latin more techniques and strategies from the research on second language acquisition. It confirmed for me that the various frustrations I felt with the efficacy of my own traditional grammar-translation methodology and the directions I wanted to head in were well founded. Patrick has loads of ideas about how to actually use Latin orally in the classroom to teach the language. He often remains entirely in Latin, and insists that his students do the same. My own advice would be that a completely Latin classroom might be the ideal, but even a partial change such as I describe below will yield benefits and insight that will allow a teacher to ultimately transition to a more fully immersive language

phasis on oral exercises related to Latin (e.g. reading the text aloud in Latin before translating it into English or transformational drills), but using it as the primary means of communication to actually teach the language. For most of my career I would never have seriously entertained this as a potentially effective approach. And until I experimented with it recently, I did not think that this methodology could be put into effect by someone like me who had not learned Latin as a spoken language. In addition, the literature on this new pedagogy can be challenging and it is daunting to contemplate making a fundamental change to how we teach a subject that we have taught the same way for many years.

What follows is my account of what changed my mind and some of the new things that I put in place to create a more active and oral Latin classroom. Overall, I feel that the shift towards a more oral, communicative methodology was a success. The sight passage that I had written for the 2nd semester final exam was more challenging than any that I had done in the past and their performance on it was quite good.⁵ Even more significant was the excitement they displayed in class, especially when we were doing oral, communicative activities. This intensified my own interest in finding new ways to teach introductory Latin. The dynamic had changed in my classroom for the better on both sides.

My own history with Latin is undoubtedly similar to that of many high school and college teachers of Latin in this country. I began Latin in high school with two years of introductory grammar culminating in courses on Vergil and Cicero in the final two years. The Latin teacher was a legendary character, a personality whose charisma inspired us to rise to the challenge of his rigorous classroom. I did a great deal of memorization of grammar and vocabulary, with a mountain of parsing on a regular basis. We scoffed at those in Spanish class who were learning how to ask the whereabouts of the bathroom, while we read central texts of the western tradition. When I arrived to university I performed well in various author courses and eventually graduated with a degree in Latin.

Still, I had some sense that all was not well. Throughout high school and college I had not done much sight translation. I tended to freeze up when facing experience. Other bibliography in this area that I have found valuable include Wills, Gruber-Miller 2005, Coffee, Tunberg and Minkova, Rasmussen, and Lindzey. There are an ever increasing number of organizations and websites that advocate for a spoken Latin approach to teaching the language, among them [SALVI](#), the [Paideia Institute](#), and Justin Slocum Bailey's website, [LIMEN](#).

⁵ I am doing a close study of their performance on this sight passage to better understand what they did and didn't understand. Unfortunately, I do not have copies of exams from previous years to compare.

Latin text that I had never seen before. I almost never sat down to work through a passage without a dictionary, grammar, and commentary by my side, and when all else failed, a translation. After nine years of regular coursework in Latin from high school through college I had not developed the ability to work through an unseen passage without aids. Class time and most tests, however, were a controlled environment where I was rewarded for my preparation and memorization of the translation of the reading that had been previously assigned.

Eventually the intense reading demands of graduate school, especially of texts such as inscriptions that had no published translation, cured me of my excessive reliance on commentaries and translations and substantially improved my ability to actually read Latin. I no longer tried to understand a text by working backwards from the translation to the rules of Latin that I had been taught must be at work.

When I began teaching Latin in graduate school at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, we were lucky to have Cecil Wooten overseeing the instruction of the beginning Latin program. Cecil had thought a lot about the methodologies of good language teaching and regularly read through new Latin textbooks to see if something had been developed that might replace *Wheelock*. He was ahead of his time in getting us to do oral work from the very beginning with our students, asking them basic questions in Latin with the vocabulary and grammar that they were learning. It was from him that I learned to write Latin stories, sight translations, which were the core of all our tests. Still, our approach was mostly a traditional grammar-translation model with *Wheelock* as our text.

Fast-forward twenty years. I had gotten tenure at Gustavus Adolphus College, a good liberal arts college in the Midwest. I taught Latin with the *Oxford Latin Course* and had evolved my pedagogy such that I taught with a sort of mash-up of deductive and inductive methods. My students were hard-working and smart. Yet if I were brutally honest, I had serious doubts that by graduation even the best of them could adequately understand an unseen passage of Cicero or Vergil, much less Propertius, Plautus, Tacitus or Seneca. But they were not to blame. They had done everything I had asked of them. It was, as I had always explained to myself, simply a case that the ancient, inflected languages were more difficult than modern languages. The vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of Latin and Greek were too vast and complex, and the differences between the ancient and modern world too severe, for my students to know enough of the words, see how the grammar was constructed, and intuit the subject matter and its probable direction enough to translate with true

understanding. And so it was not realistic that they could deal with a text they had never seen before without the aid of a dictionary, grammar, commentary, and probably even a translation in many places.

As I reflect back on it I think the insufficiency of this explanation had been gnawing at me for a while. The real turning point came after we had a student in our department who was a double major in Latin and Scandinavian Studies. He had taken Latin in high school and came in with very good language ability. When he arrived at Gustavus, he took the beginning levels of Swedish and placed into intermediate Latin. By the time he was a senior, and without ever studying abroad, he was described to me as fluent in Swedish by his professors and a Swedish exchange student studying at Gustavus at the time. His work in our department was consistently excellent and was awarded high honors, but he did not have the sort of wide ranging reading fluency in Latin that he had acquired in Swedish by the time of his graduation.⁶ It did not make sense to me that a student who I knew to be hard working and talented could be so much better in a modern language like Swedish than Latin.

At about the same time I went to a meeting of the Classical Association of Minnesota and met Liz Zogby, who was teaching K-5 Latin in Seven Hills Academy, a classical charter school in Minneapolis. When she described the Latin curriculum that she had developed for 5-10 year olds I was intrigued. What I encountered when I visited her classroom was the most exciting display of Latin pedagogy that I had seen in my 25 years of teaching. Her fourth graders had been working on the myth of Perseus for several weeks. They had become quite familiar with the vocabulary, grammar and basic outline of the story. On the day that I visited, Liz had broken them into small groups and distributed slightly different versions of the story that she had written. They read through them and worked out what it meant and what they would do in their performance as one of them narrated in Latin. The groups watched each telling of the story with great delight. When in the last performance Medusa and Perseus unexpectedly got married, there was an explosion of “ewwws” from the boys and “hurrahs” from the girls. Liz later showed me the results of a ses-

⁶ Although we do not administer any sort of sight translation exam prior to graduation, I did have this student in his senior year for an advanced Cicero course. He performed very well throughout the term, but his ability fell short of what would be termed “high reading proficiency”, especially of unseen passages. I was very happy when he received a prestigious fellowship at UC Berkeley and began his graduate work there in Scandinavian Studies in the fall of 2014. It is a testament to how good his Swedish was. His primary area of reading and research in Swedish is in the early modern period (1500-1790). In conversations with this student after he graduated he told me that his ability to read “historical Swedish” far surpassed his Latin.

sion from the previous week when she had asked them to write the story of Perseus as they remembered it without any aids. There were several page-long narratives written in perfect or near perfect Latin.

The other classes I visited that day were equally engaged in their Latin learning. A few of the activities were more traditional and recognizable to me - writing up vocabulary cards, chanting of paradigms - but most of Liz's teaching made use of an oral, communicative approach wherever possible. She had even converted all of her classroom management (e.g. counting backwards in unison to get them to settle down and focus) into Latin. Her classes were conducted in a hybrid Latinglish that worked seamlessly. This was even true even with the kindergartners, since they had not even begun reading English yet! In all her classes Latin vocabulary was always in the air, the students were constantly being exposed to little bits of grammar and syntax in the language, and it was obviously so much fun. Each month she taught them famous Latin phrases and as they were scrambling in the halls before recess I overheard various cries of "tempus fugit!"

Liz had developed her own curriculum largely in desperation. Her experience as a classics major in college with an emphasis on ancient languages had not really prepared her to teach Latin to children. Nor had she found many resources that could be easily applied to the natural abilities and strengths of younger learners. She went to a Latin immersion experience - a three-day retreat in which the participants agreed to communicate only in Latin. It was from that experience she began to read the scholarly literature on second language acquisition. Their emphasis on story-telling and the importance of producing a large volume of meaningful and comprehensible input, both reading and oral, in the teaching of a foreign language became the foundation of the many new things Liz tried.

Reflecting on my earliest experiences with Latin, I know that at first I did not really consider Latin capable of live, communicative interaction. It was a language of reading and analysis, and in my view, any attempt to speak it was an artificial and pointless exercise. In graduate school I began to open up to the possibilities of Latin as a spoken language. Cecil taught us how to use some oral Latin in our beginning Latin classes. A few years later we asked Jerzy Linderski to teach his Livy class in Latin and he obliged. The graduate students also put on two plays of Plautus, in Latin, during my time there. I played the pimp Cappadox in a production of the *Curculio*, and the slave Milphio from the *Poenulus*. I was surprised by how much I enjoyed interacting in the language, even if it was entirely scripted.

So when I heard from both Liz and Lorina Quartarone at St. Thomas University how central the immersion experience had been to their teaching of Latin, I knew that I wanted to try it. The following summer the three of us set up a spoken Latin immersion experience in Minnesota. We invited Jim Dobreff to teach it, and he, together with Diane Anderson, led a group of 16 pre-collegiate teachers and professors in a week of Latin immersion. Jim had been hired recently at UMass-Boston to help with their various programs that emphasize spoken Latin. During our week we read some Erasmus; discussed issues of grammar, vocabulary, and culture as they came up in the reading; sang Latin songs; listened to Jim lecture on trees in the arboretum; learned the Latin vocabulary of basketball in the gymnasium as we played; visited the art museum in Minneapolis and discussed various paintings; went on a tour of a local winery during which Jim translated our guide's presentation from English into Latin and our questions from Latin back to English; and we stayed entirely in Latin for all our interactions, in class and out, with each other.

I had persuaded one of my colleagues, Eric Dugdale, to do this immersion camp with me. Eric is one of the most talented classicists I know. His ability at both ancient and modern languages is very high. He grew up in Colombia, the child of German and English medical missionaries, and by 18 he was fluent in English, Spanish, German, understood the local native language Embera, and had studied French, Latin, and Greek. During his university studies he became functionally fluent in French and Italian. Eric and I had known each other for many years and are good friends, but the first hour, when we decided to start communicating only in Latin before the others had arrived, was the most agonizing time we have ever spent in each other's company. We could only communicate the most basic information to each other and the frustration of feeling that we knew Latin but were unable to express ourselves better was intense.

I gradually grew better at the ordinary verbal interactions with my fellow Latin campers; and strangely, as I shifted some vocabulary over to my active memory, it felt like the words were moving to a new part of my brain. For interactions that were less predictable, especially when Jim spoke at a regular speed with more advanced constructions and in longer sentences, I still felt lost. I desperately translated the Latin into English in my head as fast as I could, but would soon lose track of what had been said.

Then suddenly, towards the end of the third day, my comprehension steadily increased. Somewhere on that day I let go of trying to translate and understand the

Latin through English, and from that point I heard and understood everything much better. At the very end of the week I picked up some letters of Cicero that I had been reading right before the immersion experience began. I flew through the text at twice or three times the speed that I had been reading them before. It felt like I was seeing patterns in the relationship of clauses that I had been only dimly aware of before. I was stunned by this change. We had done no reading of classical Latin during the week, nor had we been studying any vocabulary or grammar all that systematically or intentionally. How could I feel such an improvement? I suspect that it was due partially to the intensity of staying entirely in Latin for a week, something that I had never done before. But it also may be that I had absorbed the rhythms and structures of Latin better than I ever had before. And cutting out the intermediate step of English was key. I suddenly realized that I had almost always understood Latin through English rather than on its own terms.

All of this led me to make major changes in my teaching of beginning Latin for the following fall. During the camp several of us had been asking Jim how exactly he taught introductory Latin entirely in Latin. He explained that he had his students read Ørberg's *Lingua Latina*, but they didn't bring it to class or ever translate it. It provided a sizeable quantity of comprehensible and meaningful reading input outside of class. The learning in class came through the things Jim did with the group, starting with an initial question and answer about everyone's names and basic descriptions of where they were sitting in relation to each other, and it grew from there.

I knew that I was not ready to make the leap to an entirely immersive, Latin classroom, so I settled on a hybrid approach. I kept many things in place from my earlier pedagogy. I used the same textbook, *Oxford Latin Course*, and required that students memorize forms and vocabulary as I had always done. We would be completing as much of the book (to the end of chapter 28 - most of the basic grammar) as in other years. I also kept an emphasis in the tests on the sight translation of a lengthy passage. At the same time I wanted the students to develop a much greater instinctive feel for grammar and vocabulary than I had seen in the past. To this end, I decided that I would aim to communicate with them in Latin for a minimum of 15 minutes per class. I still had the students read for homework the Latin narrative that connected from chapter to chapter in the *OLC*, but I cleared room for the new things that I wanted to try by cutting back on our in-class translation of the readings. Fortunately, in beginning Latin at Gustavus we meet five days per week (50 minute

class period) all year long. It was enough consistent contact to try a new, more active and oral approach, at the same time as we completed the traditional elements of beginning Latin.

On the first day I began and stayed in Latin for the first 15 minutes as we worked on learning names. They were somewhat shocked but also intrigued. I eventually told them in English that I was conducting an experiment to teach Latin with much more oral work in Latin and techniques designed to sharpen their active knowledge of Latin (and by “active knowledge” I meant their knowledge of the language such that they can speak, write, or understand the language without consulting a dictionary or grammar every step of the way). One of the first things I did was have them assume a Latin name, something I had never done before. This turned out to be extremely useful throughout the course of the year. Not only did it facilitate conversation, but I also regularly worked their names into all sorts of written exercises.

Some of the ways in which I sharpened their active knowledge of Latin will be quite familiar to all teachers of Latin no matter their pedagogical approach. For example, composition is in many ways the most “old school” of exercises. A regular feature of their homework was an English sentence I made up using vocabulary and grammatical features that they had recently learned, which they had to translate into Latin. Class every day would begin with them first passing in this homework, but then going to the board en masse to write the Latin sentence correctly. I would keep quiet and let them argue about or explain to each other why something was right or wrong, only correcting them at the very end. It was an invigorating start to each class and much more lively than any bit of review or composition I had done in the past. They enjoyed it immensely and commented on how valuable it was to get this feedback immediately on concepts we were in the midst of.⁷

Another new activity that I called “Powerpoint Latin” involved the revealing of a Latin sentence on a powerpoint slide one word at a time. I asked them either to think quietly to themselves about how the meaning of the sentence was emerging word by word, or called on them to narrate the possibilities of meaning each step of the way. This was an attempt to get them to understand Latin as it is written rather than immediately rearranging Latin word order as they hunt all over for the subject-verb-direct object.

⁷ In order to avoid using English in any way, I asked them on all the tests to produce a paragraph in Latin saying something comprehensible and interesting about a picture that I provided to them. This was suggested to me by Jim Dobreff, who does this in his beginning Latin course.

Some of the things I tried had just a smattering of oral Latin. For example, after they had studied new vocabulary I would begin class by asking “*quid significat _____*” and they would answer in English. This at least got them to hear and think of the word in Latin first before they responded in English. Another activity that I modified to include some Latin was my weekly story time. On Fridays I have usually reserved 20 minutes to read some part of an ancient story, often Homer or Vergil. I still did these dramatic readings, but inserted whatever Latin vocabulary they had learned recently into the English translation.

The drawback to all these activities was that they were still using English to get at their comprehension of the Latin. One of my mantras in the class was that they should always try to “think with their Latin mind” as a way to combat their reflex to think about the Latin through English. The greatest challenge in employing more oral Latin in this introductory level class was to make it comprehensible without using English so often as a crutch that they would see it as some sort of substitution game rather than a real language. All the literature on second language acquisition agrees that students will learn if the input is meaningful. I tried to do this in a variety of ways. Borrowing from Liz’s use of Latin especially in issuing classroom commands, I would mimic something - for example, closing a book - and then say “*libros claudite.*” After a few weeks, I would eliminate the movements and simply say the words. There were at least 20 regular commands or smaller bits of conversation and questions that they understood, followed, or responded to by the end of the first semester.⁸

I have always found that beginning Latin students have a number of problems with prepositions. Although to my mind the prepositions have clear, concrete meanings, reading them rather than actually seeing them in action or using them to communicate seemed to inhibit my student’s accurate recall of their meaning. In addition, they frequently do not see the relationship between the preposition and the object that usually follows it.⁹ To combat this I called my two tallest students up to

⁸ Greetings and goodbyes (*salve/salvete, vale/valete*), questions at the beginning of class about the whereabouts of students (*quis adest/abest, ubi est _____?*), or how they were doing (*quid agis/agitis*) and some basic responses (*male, bene, optime*), and a growing number of commands and adverbs appropriate to various situations in class (*sede/sedete, surge/surgite, audi/audite, scribe/scribite, date, dic/dicite, responde/respondete, librum claude/libros claudite, magnā cum voce, lente, iam nunc*)

⁹ I trot out a huge bag of tricks for helping students deal with the various challenges that seem to attend the prepositions. I always pronounce it “PREEE-position” and tell them that a prepositional phrase is the easiest little gift bag of Latin they will ever encounter in a sight translation; but they will

the front of the room and had them form a little house with their arms arching up over my head. I then proceeded to walk through the house, sit in the house, run away from the house, work near the house, etc. As I did so, I spoke what I was doing in Latin and had the class then repeat the prepositional phrase. I then directed them to call out prepositional phrases and move me around the house. Periodically, and as we encountered new prepositions, we reenacted the human house activity.

One of the challenges of reading Latin literature is its love of the abstract. Most Latin textbooks do attempt to introduce vocabulary for real and specific things, but they tend to prioritize the abstract words. None of them, to my knowledge, expose students early on to the most tangible words that everyone hears all the time and learns first in their native language: the words for the body. This is also the case in the *OLC* and so one day we ran through more than 30 Latin words for various body parts, starting from the face and moving down from there. I even got them up to sing “*Caput, Umeri, Genua, Digiti*” (with the further line of “*oculi, aures, os, nasus*”) which took care of 8 words very quickly. I didn’t let them take notes, nor did I worry if it belonged to a declension or was a form we had not yet learned. Over the course of a week we would review these body parts every day for 5 minutes. At the end of the week we played a game of “*Simon dicit*” and they loved it.¹⁰

The oral, more active dimension of these exercises gave me new and very immediate opportunities, beyond sight translation, to see their understanding of the language. It changed up the slower dynamic of translating a homework passage and required of them a more heightened focus in class in case I asked a question or directed them to do something. And it was just plain fun. Although a few students were made more anxious by the oral nature of the classroom, most of them were excited by it and rose to the challenge of listening more carefully and responding appropriately. I began looking for additional ways that I could convert my old ways of teaching into these new oral exercises. Although I still reserved some time for translation of the prepared passages, I began reviewing the stories in the *OLC* by asking simple true/false questions in Latin. And at the end of term, instead of a more traditional review, I conducted a Jeopardy-like session all in Latin, with categories such as “*nomina*” and “*verba*”, in which they reviewed vocabulary. Their favorite categories, however, were the more complex, communicative ones such as “*nomen regularly pluck the object of a preposition out in an attempt to have it do some other kind of work in a sentence.*”

¹⁰ Jim Dobreff told me that he had his beginning students learn the words for the body early on, in part because the body parts are always right there and easy for them to review.

discipuli/discipulae” in which I described a student in the class and they had to figure out who it was.

It was still the case throughout the semester that the oral Latin was highly structured and organized by me. It seemed that the immersive element of the class was not intensive enough to have prepared us to simply converse in Latin in an open-ended way, nor was I confident that I could manage a more general conversation in a productive direction. And yet, there were a few moments during the term when I could see that they were almost capable of expressing themselves more seriously in Latin and wanted that. One of those moments came in a written exercise where I have them write Latin poems following the haiku form. It is so compact that it is excellent compositional training for the sorts of concision that they will see when they begin reading Latin poetry. They produced several interesting, contemplative haikus on love and death (we had just read the Dido-Aeneas story in the *OLC*; for examples, see Dugdale).

Another moment came towards the end of the semester. I decided to begin one class period by asking them several questions in Latin and to insist, when they tried to respond in English, that they must remain in Latin. I modeled to them various humorous ways of answering the question “*quid est difficile?*” (*difficile est in equo dormire*), and began going around the room asking the question. I came to one of the best students in the class and instead of taking an easy, humorous route, she began to try to describe some of the struggles she was having that semester. I was surprised by this, but I shouldn’t have been. A new language can give us new opportunities to understand and express ourselves. It is one of the main benefits I hope students will take away from reading real Latin like Vergil or Ovid. And here was a student striving for that in her first semester.

In the spring I thought that that we would have to spend the bulk of our time learning the grammar of second semester Latin in more traditional ways, and I gradually cut back on the time I reserved for active, oral Latin. I see now that this was unnecessary. Still, I kept up with many of the experimental strategies that I had tried in the fall and added or refined a few. For example, I made a change to the oral vocabulary quizzing that I often did at the beginning of class (“*quid significat _____?*”) by changing it into a powerpoint exercise. I would find an image of the word on the internet, project it as a powerpoint slide, and then ask them “*quid signi-*

ficat _____?” while pointing to the image.¹¹ This took the English entirely out of the exercise and allowed me to add further description in Latin.

At one point, I asked them what area of vocabulary, not covered by our textbook, they might want to learn. They named a few and “words for animals” was one of the most popular.¹² Similar to the vocabulary of the body from the fall, I taught them approximately 20 new words for animals, but did so by describing the animals entirely in Latin. They really enjoyed this and it was apparent to me that by the middle of their 2nd semester they had enough vocabulary such that I could explain almost anything in terms they would understand.

I also converted one of my period-long quizzes into a scavenger hunt. I set up Latin clues around the building, which they had to find and solve (some of which involved performing tasks that I order them to do in Latin) in order to complete the quiz. I broke them into small groups and everyone who completed the quiz by the end of the period was assured of an 85, with extra points awarded depending on how fast and well they did on the quiz and some added bonus exercises. Finally, I began writing Latin emails to the entire class with various riddles and jokes. Several of them went out of their way to comment in the final evaluations how much they had loved both the alternative form of testing, but also these little, daily Latin communications.

I am certain that these students learned Latin better than any group that I have taught in the past.¹³ I looked back at several second semester final exams that I had given over the years and this sight passage was more difficult and much longer than any previous one. Overall, the students performed quite well on it. And I have never had beginning language students free write Latin. It was certainly not perfect, but they could do it in a way that only our upper class majors are capable of *after* taking a prose composition course. In addition, even with all the experimentation and my worries that many of them might have chosen Latin in order to avoid speaking the language, the retention was quite good. At *Gustavus Adolphus* there is a two

¹¹ It is easier to find images of nouns rather than verbs, though there are many gifs that can prompt the idea of a verb.

¹² Some other areas of vocabulary they are eager to learn include “sex” and other kinds of taboo language (curses, terms of verbal abuse, etc.). I do teach them some of this, but am careful to point out that it is not acceptable to use this sort of language against other people (as the Romans would have).

¹³ Since I was teaching 2 sections, I had the notion that I might try to teach one of the sections with the new pedagogy and one with the old and compare them. But on the third day of class when a student in the control group asked me why they were not getting to do all the “fun, spoken Latin” and which method I thought might turn out to be better, I folded and taught them both in the same way.

semester language requirement, so it was to be expected that 25 of the 27 students would stay in Latin between the first and second semester. It was especially gratifying, however, to see 13 of those 25 continue into the third semester when they had already satisfied the requirement.¹⁴

I imagine that a fully immersive Latin program would realize even greater gains in the students' knowledge of Latin, at least as judged by their ability to sight translate real Latin. At this time I do not know of any studies that have examined this, but there are a growing number of programs and individual teachers, on the collegiate and pre-collegiate level, who are teaching Latin with a more active, oral pedagogy.¹⁵ The evidence of the effectiveness of this methodology will have to come from the performance of their students.¹⁶

Even though I did not give my students a fully immersive experience in beginning Latin and I do not yet have definitive proof that it is a better approach, I look upon this more active and oral pedagogy as successful and worth continuing for a few reasons. First, there is no doubt that it allowed me to give students repeated exposure to words at a far higher rate than before. Previously, when I relied only on the readings as a way for the students to encounter the Latin in context, they might see a particular word only a few times throughout the semester.¹⁷ With the oral exercises in class I could greatly increase the rate of exposure. In addition, the social, communicative dimension of asking a question or giving a command made the importance for students of remembering individual words and elements of grammar

14 For comparison, the following year and a half at Gustavus Adolphus (when I was on leave) the beginning Latin sequence went from 27 to 24 to 4 in the third semester.

15 The SALVI website is a hub of information and contacts for those who are interested in spoken Latin, especially in the 3 day and week long immersion experiences that have become popular. I do not know of a complete list of those who are teaching Latin entirely in Latin, but at the college/university level this includes Lorina Quartarone at the University of St. Thomas, the classics department at UMass-Boston, and Nancy Llewelyn at Wyoming Catholic College.

16 From my conversations with Jim Dobreff, he contended that the ultimate purpose of those who advocate the use of spoken Latin in the classroom is to make students better readers of Latin. It would seem that a study of students' ability at sight reading would be the best sign that this pedagogy was superior. In my opinion this would also be the most compelling evidence to persuade those teachers who might be on the fence about making such a change or were even more openly opposed to it.

17 I have not done a systematic study of vocabulary in the *Oxford Latin Course*, but as we move beyond the first 5-6 chapters and there is much more vocabulary assigned, many individual words tend to be used much less frequently. This is perhaps inevitable for any textbook, but it suggests to me that the only way to remedy this is to use the words orally in class. In terms of assigning a base of words that all undergraduates reading Greek and Latin should know, the [core vocabulary lists developed by Chris Francese](#) are an extremely valuable new tool.

much more intense. There was a crispness to their focus in class that was a definite improvement upon the past.

There was also a new found excitement and joy for both the students and me that was undeniable, especially in our work together in class. In part, I was freed up from the grammar-translation mode to explore many new ways of getting them to demonstrate their understanding of the language. There was greater variety in what we did together in class and they grew to have several favorite activities that we would regularly come back to. But I am convinced that at the core of this new dynamic was an unexpected delight when they understood something I said or could make themselves understood to me or their classmates.

I saw this early on in the first semester. At the end of the second week I was searching for ways in which they could demonstrate their growing knowledge of Latin without speaking English. By this point they knew approximately 15 verbs and I had just taught them the negative imperative construction. I went into class one day and explained in English that I would begin doing something until they commanded me properly in Latin not to. At which point I began shouting at the top of my lungs. Some laughed nervously, a few were enjoying an unscripted moment in Latin, while others tried to make me stop by saying, “Shhhhh! Don’t clamare!” But I kept on shouting, even louder. Then there was a glimmer of understanding and someone said, “Non clamare!” But I kept on shouting. Finally, they got it: “Noli clamare!” I immediately began falling repeatedly to my knees. I could see the wheels turning in their heads, furiously trying to think of the verb that would make me stop falling down: “Noli cadere!” Just as I was getting back up, another one shouted out (and I hadn’t anticipated this), “Noli surgere!” Finally, as I started to walk out of the room, one student stood up and cried out at the top of his lungs to his fellow classmates, “Noli dicere!” because he wanted me to continue walking out the door. We came to refer to this game as “Noli, Magister, Noli!”

I now see in a way that I did not before that the pleasure of experiencing true, live moments of communication is fundamental to the learning of a new language, even for a “dead” one like Latin.

The student’s solution to my riddle was “*quod oblitus est litteram ‘v’.*” She explained to me later that my instruction to think in Latin was key. She gave up trying to imagine a plausible answer in English and instead meditated on the Latin until she saw the literal nature of the riddle: the *servus* would only show up *serus* if he lost his ‘v’. She also said that after coming up with the answer she realized that

the solution to the riddle was almost bilingual (which was completely accidental on my part): the consonantal ‘v’ sounds like a clipped pronunciation of “way.” And for those who might object that such a joke is hardly Roman, my thanks to Tony Corbeill for pointing out to me Plautus’ punning on *medicus* and *mendicus* at *Rud.* 1304-1306.

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