

Making Sense of Comprehensible Input in the Latin Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade, what once seemed a huge gulf between modern and classical language teachers has begun to look more like a practical bridge between helpful neighbors. This paper attempts to illustrate how that professional sharing is engaging Latin and other teachers of classical languages in teaching practices grounded in the theory Comprehensible Input. The considerations include summaries of the theory of Comprehensible Input first articulated as five hypotheses by Stephen Krashen and subsequently supported by other researchers such as Lee and VanPatten. Illustrations of the practice of CI come from the author's work in his secondary school Latin program via written and video examples of the work, shared lessons, assessments, and commentary on them. The paper considers a range of approaches from core practices to strategies for reading, writing, and assessing.

KEYWORDS

comprehensible input, pedagogy, reading, writing, equity, accessible Latin, SLA

In a recent article, Stephen Krashen described characteristics of the language teacher in a way that may be instructive to Latin teachers who are considering changes in their approach to our art and craft.

First, it needs to be pointed out that very few people are like us, interested in language for its own sake. Very few people take the pleasure that we do in understanding and using another language, let alone the pleasure of successfully monitoring a consciously-learned rule. We are, I suspect, a fringe group. (Krashen, 2014).

Classical language teachers are not the average kind of learner. We love things about our languages not often shared by the average person. When we limit

our classes to those who share our interests we enhance the false notion that Latin cannot be learned by the average person. This practice has kept our programs small. The Modern Language Association has just published a new report showing a decline in the study of all languages in our universities, but among them Latin (16.2 percent) and Ancient Greek (35.5 percent) show by far the deepest losses. These are the deepest declines since 1968 (Goldberg et al. 28). The report acknowledges unknown causes of the drop, but speculates that it may be the proximity to our recent recession. Yet Latin and other classical languages in western cultures have much to offer in self-understanding and historical perspective for our students. I know that I share this value of classical languages with my fellow teachers.

I am motivated by three things in the work that I do: love of the Latin language itself; the belief that every student in our schools, public or private, has a right to access Latin and its connections; and the desire to create Latin programs that are strong and sustainable. In this paper, I aim to demonstrate current attempts to integrate the teaching of Latin with the principles and evolving practices of an overarching approach called Comprehensible Input. I will begin with a summary of the theory of CI followed by written and video examples of the classroom work as we do it in our public high school program. These samples and examples include a sample lesson for a Latin 1 class, an extended unit in Latin 4, how to personalize daily work, making reading Latin texts accessible, and specific practices of assessment and grammar instruction within the theory of CI. The paper includes Appendix 1 with a compilation of working CI principles as they pertain to Latin, and Appendix 2 with shared materials for the Latin 4 unit. These materials may be copied, used and improved by the reader with due credit given for their public use.

WHAT IS COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT?

Comprehensible Input begins with the hypotheses and research of Stephen Krashen in *Second Language Acquisition*. Since his initial work in the 1980's both researchers (Lee and VanPatten, chapters 1-3) and practitioners (Asher, 2009; Ray and Seely, 2008; Adair-Hauck and Donato) have contributed to understanding and articulating the principles and evolving practices for use with second language learners. The theory lies in the five hypotheses of Krashen (*Principles and Practice* 9-32), each of which builds on the other:

1. The **Acquisition-Learning Distinction**. One *acquires* language unconsciously through meaningful engagement with the language while one *learns about* the language via direct instruction of rules and usage.
2. The **Monitor Hypothesis**. The human mind sets up an internal monitor around language rules, and the monitor will interfere with acquisition when it is called upon. The monitor is useful once language is acquired but interferes if called upon too early. The monitor is of greatest service when formally editing one's written work or preparing formal speech.
3. The **Natural Order Hypothesis**. Building on the work of many researchers in SLA prior to him, Krashen observed that in each language some structures are acquired early and others later. No research exists which delineates the order for a particular language. Krashen furthermore noted that one cannot force a structure to be acquired earlier than its natural order in a language.
4. The **Input Hypothesis**. Perhaps the core of these hypotheses, then, is that all language is acquired by human beings when they receive understandable and compelling messages in the language. A significant part of this fourth hypothesis is that output (speaking and writing) is the product of input. If more output is desired, more input is required.
5. The **Affective Filter Hypothesis**. Finally, Krashen noted that as stress increases for the language learner, acquisition decreases. The implications are broader than language learning, but in a second language classroom, the aim is to reduce stress as much as possible (Krashen pp. 10-30). Each of these hypotheses has been demonstrated repeatedly enough that we might refer to them as CI theory.¹ Likewise, each has implications for classroom practices.

¹ For a deeper discussion of CI theory and its dependability, [this discussion by Chris Stolz](#) is very useful. Despite the three decades since Krashen's earliest work on the hypotheses, various voices in linguistics and the L2 teaching field continue to either dismiss them as unprovable or *passé* because they are so old. Stolz addresses the former in his blog discussion, and I will observe that, regarding the latter, hypotheses require time and testing before they go into the field. We are now in that rich period where the hypotheses-become-theory are moving into dynamic practice.

The last two decades have produced what has become a dynamic, collaborative, experimental, often times passionate, and always evolving set of practices among teachers of many languages who are attempting to teach their languages with Comprehensible Input theory and practices.² Latin teachers as a whole who are working with CI theory focus on and include dozens of approaches in which:

1. The teacher consistently is delivering understandable messages in Latin. That is, the teacher speaks and offers readings that are most readily understood, in Latin, by the students. Among CI teachers, it has become a recognized practice, for example, that any reading in which 90 percent or more of the words are not known by the student is unreadable. When the teacher is speaking in Latin, there should be various ways of checking comprehension and to give students the ability to indicate loss of comprehension.
2. The teacher uses material that is interesting to students. This requires the teacher to know his/her audience, and to work to find and create Latin materials that hold student interest.
3. Latin teachers will teach in ways that reduce stress in the room. The reality is that average students find language learning stressful. To do this, CI teachers across languages insist on “teaching to the eyes” as a literal way of taking the barometric pressure in the room. Humor, stories, personalization and creating personal connections with students bring the stress level down in the room.

Recent research validates that not only language acquisition but knowledge of the structure and grammar of a language happens largely unconsciously to the learner (Morgan-Short et al.). Their study shows that the students given “immersive”³ approaches rather than direct grammar instruction showed brain responses similar to native speakers and, when tested six months after instruction, retained the acquired language with brain patterns that continued to develop as those of native speak-

² Today, the blogosphere offers rich fare in the daily practices of CI work. Among the best are [Ben Slavic](#), [Jason Fritze](#), [Susan Gross](#), [Karen Rowan](#), [Laurie Clarq](#), [Keith Toda](#), and [Rachel Ash and Miriam Patrick](#).

³ This is Morgan-Short’s term. In the CI community distinction is made between CI approaches and immersion methods. In a true immersion approach, L1 is never used. In CI, L1 is used whenever it is needed to make L2 comprehensible. See example below.

ers. When a CI teacher delivers understandable messages in Latin about topics that students are interested in, and the teacher keeps the stress in the room low, students forget that this is a language class. They leave having acquired a great deal that day without thinking about it. “Language is acquired through comprehensible input. It is an unconscious process that happens when the learner is focused on the message rather than the language itself” (Krashen, personal correspondence).

Most Latin teachers already engage in CI to some degree even if they do not know the term, the theories, or the body of work amassing around it. For example, most teachers of any language introduce the vocabulary that will be new to that unit. The teacher shows students a list of vocabulary, pronouncing the new words and giving the English meaning. This is, in its most rudimentary form, delivering an understandable message in the target language. “Class, *puella* means girl.” The teacher proceeds through the list, the students follow, more or less. What routinely happens, then, departs from CI into what teachers tend to deem more important: explaining the new grammar for the unit. By taking this traditional turn, otherwise good and well-intending teachers shift away from the thing that all students can make progress in—understandable messages in Latin—to what no human being adequately retains for very long—grammar.⁴ Teachers love grammar, and teachers spend constant time with it (a requirement if one is to retain any of it). Average learners have little interest in it.⁵ This is a crucial intersection between what the teacher finds interesting and believes to be crucial to language learning and what will actually work for average students.

A Sample Lesson Using CI

What would it look like to continue doing CI with that new unit rather than turn immediately to grammar? Imagine the teacher taking four words from that list that would ordinarily be introduced as described above. Let’s imagine that this is a Latin 1 class and the four words are *puella*, *puer*, *ambulare*, and *videre*. The teacher must choose four words that can provide some interesting discussion for the class as well as help build needed vocabulary for the unit in question. The choice of four words is based on a class period of between 45 minutes and an hour. The teacher

⁴ For a summary of the research on retention of grammar through direct grammar instruction, cf. Krashen, “[Teaching Grammar: Why Bother?](#)”

⁵ I will return to this issue of grammar and what to do with it below within the discussion on assessment in a CI classroom. For the time, let me state clearly: we teach grammar in a CI classroom, but we do it, and assess it very differently from a traditional approach.

writes those four words on the board with their English equivalent next to it. Typical dictionary formatting is not necessary. The teacher, as above, walks through the four, pronounces, names the English meaning, and asks the class if there are any questions. The teacher then asks everyone to remove all items from their desks and give full attention to the discussion they are about to have completely in Latin. This discussion presumes that other vocabulary is already known by the students from previous activities like this. The expansion of CI from simply introducing the English meaning of the words might go something like the following.

Teacher: *Discipuli, olim erat puella* (pauses, walks to the board, points to the word *puella*).

At this point the **students** offer what they have been trained to do. They all respond with a chorus of oohs and ahs, as if the teacher has just revealed the mysteries of the universe.⁶

Teacher: *Discipuli, quod nomen ei erat?*

Students then call out a variety of names. The teacher pauses over each and considers as if waiting for the perfect name which is finally identified. Why bother with this? We bother with this sort of thing because it creates interest in what is unfolding. It makes the process more compelling.

Teacher: *Ah, ita vero. Puellae erat nomen "Cassandra." Cassandra erat puella, et olim, Cassandra, puella nostra, ambulabat* (teacher pauses and walks over to the board and points to the word *ambulare* on the board)...*ubi? Discipuli, ubi puella, nomine Cassan-*

⁶ This will seem silly and unnecessary to many teachers and to some students. It certainly did to me, at first. Introducing this element of play—of pretending to be astonished and awed by every new fact—however simple—creates the atmosphere that allows the class to very quickly move into a compelling engagement of the language that becomes less self-conscious—the place where acquisition happens routinely and permanently. A teacher cannot, however, introduce this element half-heartedly. Students will sniff out the lack of commitment and refuse to play the game. Playing the game is essential. *Magistro duce, ludamus!*

dra, ambulabat? Puella in silva ambulabat? Puella in urbe, Atlanta, ambulabat? Puella in oppido, Lilburnia [Lilburn, Georgia], ambulabat? Puella in Mall of Georgia ambulabat? The teacher walks through this series of questions and awaits for a *minime* or *certe* from the students. The affirmative is almost a roar when the teacher mentions that the girl was walking in the Mall of Georgia.

Teacher: *Ita vero. Sine dubio, discipuli, puella nostra nomine Cassandra in Mall of Georgia ambulabat.*

In this scenario, the teacher is assuring that every student in the room will learn these four words, today, and never forget them by delivering 45 minutes to an hour of understandable messages in Latin. They will not have to study, do drills or homework to remember *puella*, *puer*, *ambulare* and *videre* because the teacher has kept them engaged in a story about a girl walking in the Mall of Georgia where she (you can imagine how the rest of it unfolds) sees a boy named Apollo. They walk through the mall, and Apollo gives her a special gift. The story remains simple, and without their realizing it, all the students have learned four new words in Latin. The teacher can give them a pass-out-of class quiz on the four words that day, or the next or at the end of the week, but all the students will know these four words. Just in the example above, the word *puella* was used ten times. By the end of an hour session conducted like this, delivering understandable messages in Latin, the students will have heard each of the four words many times. Finding ways to reiterate the targeted vocabulary is a device called “circling,” and circling can be used in every kind of activity in the classroom beyond simply introducing new vocabulary. At some point in this imagined class above, the teacher might ask for volunteers to be Cassandra and Apollo walking at the mall so that as the story unfolds, they act out what is happening. The teacher might also stop and interview Cassandra and/or Apollo about what they want to do next, what they see, what they hear, etc. This type of circling is an example of Personal Questions and Answers (hereafter, PQA). These added dimensions allow for more repetitions of targeted vocabulary, increase student engagement, and assure that the learning is happening without the learner being aware of that. We often refer to this experience of “becoming lost in the flow” of the second language, and this is where language acquisition, including grammar, happens

most effectively. Language acquisition is unconscious. That's why silly works. I should point out that I have used these methods at middle school, high school, and university level courses, and I have demonstrated them in both Latin and classical Greek classes. They work with every student, all the time. Via the CI theory stated by Krashen and supported by Lee and VanPatten, we come to understand that this is how all language is acquired, whether first or subsequent languages. Even the 22-year old who is approaching Latin as a subsequent language can actually acquire ability to understand the language, spoken or read, if invited to acquire it this way. Our traditional programs do not allow the average 22-year old to make progress in Latin, and as a result, we insure that people think that Latin is harder than other languages, that only some people can learn Latin, and that our Latin programs will remain small and elusory for average human beings.

Given the imagined setting above, Latin teachers will begin to do the math.⁷ "If I spend an entire hour on just four words, I will never be able to cover everything I want to/must cover." That statement is true, and it deserves the most serious soul searching and consideration of Latin teachers at every level, especially the University level, for it is at the University level where future teachers of Latin and Greek gain their degrees and "learn to teach" whether the Classics Department thinks of itself as teaching teachers to teach or not. Graduates will simply, by default, go and do what was done to them. We all do, and this locks us into the vicious cycle which I am describing: Latin is harder than other languages; not everyone can learn Latin; Latin programs will always be small.

If we teach with CI approaches, it does require us to let go of what may be sacred domains for us in our curricula, not the least of which is grammar. At a workshop several years ago, a Latin teacher appeared to me to be distraught about half way through a three day workshop. Upon inquiry, she told me that she realized that if she taught with CI she would no longer be able to teach grammar and culture, and that she was a "really, really good grammar teacher." She was on the verge of

⁷ Let me be more explicit about "the math." I teach in a public school with 180 required school days for students. My Latin classes meet 5 times a week for almost an hour each. I have found that I cannot introduce 4 new words every day of the week or year. What is more reasonable given interruptions to the school day, including massive testing requirements by State and Federal governments is that I can introduce new words 3 days a week. This equates to about 200 words per semester, about 400 words a year. Some students will acquire more, and some less. If a CI approach is used for four years, those students will have acquired about 1600 vocabulary words which places them in a mid to high intermediate proficiency range. The *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012* indicate that that is an appropriate expectation for four years of high school language work for the average learner.

tears. She had only made it halfway through the insight. Indeed, she would no longer be able to spend hours teaching about Latin grammar if she took up CI. What she had not come to see, yet, was that, more than ever, she needed to be the grammar, history, and culture expert in the room. At every turn in a CI classroom, the Latin teacher must make choices about which vocabulary to focus on, which grammatical structures to use, how to shape a story that introduces cultural, historical and literary themes all the while keeping the work in the room in Latin engaging and understandable. CI teaching is intense, demanding, and exciting work. It not only allows, but demands, that the Latin teacher be the expert in all things pertaining to Latin,⁸ and it requires the teacher to use those things in rather non-traditional ways. The teacher at that workshop has gone on to be a fabulous CI teacher who knows that her love for grammar is not being wasted.

Ten years ago when I replaced the retiring teacher in the school, she had 130 students in four levels of Latin. Her retention rate from Latin 1 through Latin 4 was .2 percent, that percentage represented by the one and only Latin 4 student. That year she was relegated to independent study in the corner of the Latin 3 class. I began that year converting that traditional program to a CI approach. A decade later, Latin has moved from 4th of 4 languages in my school to 2nd of 4 languages. We have 592 students registered in five levels of Latin and four of us preparing to teach Latin full or extended time beginning August 2015. Our retention rate this past year was 62 percent. The special education department in our school is delighted to place students in Latin for foreign language. As they tell us, they know that their students will be successful. At the year's end last year, the three of us teaching Latin at 5 levels, including AP, had no failures at all. We require all of our Latin students to take the National Latin Exam, and routinely 60+ percent score high enough for an award on some level. We have been giving the ALIRA Reading Proficiency exam for the last two years.⁹ Our goal is to give it at the end of Latin 1 to all students and then again when students exit our program at the fourth year. Over the next five years, our aim is to identify what are the average gains that students in our CI Latin program can

⁸ To balance this statement, let me add that it is enough to be the teacher who is always becoming more expert. None of us is the ultimate expert in a field as wide and deep as classical languages. Some critics of this approach have ascertained that unless Latin teachers speak perfect Latin (however defined) then they lead students astray by teaching Latin this way. I find that to be a purist approach at a time and in a field when we can no longer wait for or even expect every teacher to become a perfect speaker of Latin. Despite our mistakes (which we become very aware of and continue to repair), students of all kinds make good progress in Latin when we teach with CI.

⁹ See [this ACTFL website](#) for additional information on the ALIRA Latin Reading Proficiency test.

be expected to make. Thus far, 54 percent of our Latin 1 students score in the low intermediate reading proficiency range using the ACTFL proficiency guides.¹⁰ This early finding has surprised us, as our expectation was that they would score in the mid to high novice range. The remaining 46 percent did largely fall in the Novice high range. We are pleased that our Latin 1 students thus far taught only with CI approaches are scoring so well in reading proficiency.

Our latest efforts have been to create a smoother transition from our CI program to the AP Latin course. We have done this in part by being very clear that AP Latin is not the capstone course in our program. Latin 4 is the capstone and continues the CI approach. In the 2014-15 school year, we began using embedded readings created for every segment of the AP Latin exam. This approach is still too experimental for me to cite any data or results other than to say that all of those AP students reported that they felt prepared for the AP Latin exam after taking it. This kind of turn around and strengthening of the program is not unique to my school. Latin teachers using CI report both this same kind of strengthening of their program as well as a significant struggle in making the transition. CI work turns our teaching world upside down in several ways.

HOW DOES COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT WORK?

Let me describe a sequence of CI activities that I used recently in a Latin 4 class with some brief video clips as examples. I had devoted most of the semester to a theme simply called *Ludi* (cf. Appendix 2 for a list of linked documents used in this unit from initial planning, building vocabulary and comprehension and final assessments). I spent a week introducing and circling vocabulary required for reading Seneca's description of his room over the baths (cf. *Epistulae Morales* 56.1-2, 14b-15). If you recall above, circling the vocabulary means that on any given day, I had chosen four new words that students would encounter in Seneca's writing, and I engaged students in conversation and/or stories using those four words. I also used the process of a *dictatio* to introduce much of that new vocabulary. I did this until we had enough vocabulary to proceed to Seneca. I prepared two embedded (simplified) versions of that Letter for them so that after circling the new vocabulary, they were

¹⁰ "At the Intermediate Low sublevel, readers are able to understand some information from the simplest connected texts dealing with a limited number of personal and social needs, although there may be frequent misunderstandings. Readers at this level will be challenged to derive meaning from connected texts of any length." (*ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012* 23)

able to read, with ease, embedded version 1, embedded version 2 and then Seneca's letter itself (see Appendix 2).

With my embedded versions of Seneca's letter, there was no translation. We simply read and discussed the letter in Latin. I asked questions in Latin, and they gave answers in Latin. They asked me, in Latin, for help in understanding difficult spots, and I rephrased, paraphrased, and explained, in Latin.¹¹ One of the noted annoying sounds for Seneca was the voice of the *pilicrepus*, the referee of the *Trigon* game¹² who—when he arrives—just rather finishes off endurance of noise for Seneca—*actum est*. That was my segue into teaching the vocabulary for games in general and eventually the rules for *Trigon* in particular. Here are some clips from that day, discussing by way of circling and PQA about [what games](#) my students like to play, [where they are played](#), and [how many players are involved](#). On the following day, I explained the rules of *Trigon*, and we went outside to our school's tennis courts and played games of *Trigon*. The “deal” was that we could stay out playing as long as all of the conversation was held in Latin. Each game required three *lusores* and a *pilicrepus*. Not only did they stay in Latin for two days of playing, but they began to extract from me (*Doctor! Quomodo dicitur...*) the language they needed for cheer, cajoling and otherwise enjoying the games. I assessed their speaking while they were not noticing. At the end of that week after a [discussion reviewing Seneca's letter](#) and *Trigon's* rules, they each wrote a two paragraph writing assessment on their experience of *Trigon*, its rules, and how they would respond to Quintilian's observation that *apud infantes, mores detegi inter ludendum* (paraphrased from Quint. *Instit.* 1.3.12; in English, “among children, that values are discovered in their playing”).

In these video segments, we are seeing students who have been in a CI Latin program from the beginning, for four years. They have learned to do some things that are core to the process. They have learned to extract language from the teacher. From the very beginning, they have been taught how to ask for the language they don't have, in Latin—*quomodo dicitur...* They have come to expect discussions, ac-

¹¹ Adair-Hauck, Donato, and Cumo (95) identify this as stressing natural discourse and encourages students to comprehend meaningful and longer stretches of discourse from the very beginning of the lesson.

¹² In the work of this unit, I taught the classes how to play *Trigon* and did so completely in Latin. I taught the rules of the game as if it were a story, circling new terms and involving students in PQA conversations. When it seemed to me that the students understood, I had them take turns explaining the rules of the game in Latin. See Appendix 2 for documents pertaining to these activities. There are [modern compilations](#) of how to play *Trigon* and other Roman games. We took these and adapted, e.g. games played to 7 instead of 21 to facilitate more games within a class period.

tivities, readings and discussions, drawings and discussion, that take place in Latin where, again, they are encouraged to stop the process when they don't understand. Such signals can be hand gestures, questions or simply a puzzled look on the face to which the teacher responds with a more understandable message in Latin. The entire focus of teaching with CI is on delivering understandable messages in Latin. The teacher must be prepared to do a great deal of speaking in Latin (something most of us have to work on, all the time), in repetitive yet engaging ways. Remember, silly works. While input is the focus, it is not the result.

The next sequence of the unit was to introduce the general idea of *aleae* and in particular the *tali* made originally of sheep's ankle bones. I drew on material from the [Latin version of Wikipedia](#) and created a slide show (see Appendix 2) showing pictures of the *tali*, holding the entire discussion in Latin.¹³ The following day, we cleared the room and [played a game of Tali](#) in groups of 4 or 5, three *lusores* and one *pilicrepus* to keep score. Again, their job was to have fun and remain in Latin. The other teachers in my school are doing similar things with Latin 1-3 students as well. What the reader observes here could not have happened without a significant amount of input prior to "gambling day." Because I was building an entire unit around the idea of "games" what we acquired in terms of vocabulary and grammatical structures with one game often added strength to the next game. In other words, the long and dense unit on games with added readings in Seneca, discussions around Quintilian and the introduction of fifteen Roman virtues (see Appendix 2 for the list of virtues and related materials) into the mix created a groundswell of vocabulary and grammatical structures which they understood.

Every game that my Latin 4 students played during the semester had a *pilicrepus* of some sort, and they were asked to think about the *mores* that were displayed or lacking in each game. The partial quotation from Quintilian and the list of fifteen virtues extracted from Latin literature were in front of them, constantly. They read excerpts (sentences and small paragraphs) of Seneca, Quintilian, Cicero and other authors even while they are not capable of reading those authors *in toto*.

Personalization

One of the most successful activities in a CI classroom is actually a combination of two things called Personal Questions and Answers (PQA) and One Word
13 For easy reference, we bought multiple sets of *Tali* from [the American Classical League resource center](#) and I converted the rules supplied with it, both the game version and the divination form, to Latin for our use.

Pictures. I want to briefly demonstrate how I begin with a one word picture and immediately move into a PQA moment. This combination can be used at any level from Beginner to Advanced proficiency levels. [In this clip](#), I am introducing the word *collis* to a Latin 3 class and interchange between that as a one word picture and interviewing students about whether they live on a *collis* or not. We were preparing to read Livy's description of the founding of Rome with Romulus and Remus taking the augurs on the Palatine and Aventine hills.

As I tried to illustrate above with the imaginary class, in this actual class, I had chosen targeted vocabulary and thought, ahead of time, about how I could turn that word *collis* into something that is compelling. Asking students about where they live makes the connection immediately personal, and anything personal becomes compelling. One of the game changers for this kind of teaching is that it constantly requires the teacher to engage his/her own imagination about delivering understandable messages as well as knowing the particular audience of students that will come into the classroom at a given hour. We have become well aware in our program that even a teacher teaching one prep (all Latin 1 all day, for example) 5 or 6 times a day cannot assume that what worked during one class will necessarily work exactly that way in the next class. With CI where the conversations must be compelling, the CI Latin teacher must adapt to that ever changing reality.

Making Reading More Accessible

With limited space here, I want to illustrate the power of creating and using embedded readings. This is a topic worthy of attention by itself, but with three short examples I can suggest to you what we are doing with them and how helpful they are to students. This is the place, by the way, where CI approaches begin to have some positive effect even on the AP Latin curriculum which is largely a philological exercise rather than language acquisition. To create embedded readings with extant material, one works backwards:

1. Start with the target text that you want students to read and understand.
2. Identify words that you know they will have difficulty with.
3. Re-write the text using synonyms for those difficult words or leaving them out altogether to begin with so that you have a somewhat modified text.

4. Re-write the text one more time including ONLY words that you know they will know—perhaps a short summary of the total text.
5. Work with them in reverse order like these created from the *Aeneid* 1.1-4.

Embedded version 1

*Ego, Vergilius, fabulam cano.
Fabula est de armis et viro.
Vir iter fecit. Vir iactatus est in mari et terris.
Vir per multa horribilia laboravit quod Iuno erat
iratissima.*

This first version ensures that every student reading this will be able to understand, in Latin, the content of 1.1-4 of *The Aeneid*. A general rule for reading is that if the reader understands more than 90 percent of the words in a text, then it is comprehensible. Less than that, even 88 percent, and the text will become so burdensome for average readers that they will abandon the effort. This fact drawn from CI work indicates that our traditional aim to have students know 80 percent of the vocabulary in classical texts so that they can read them is an aim that fails to deliver for average students.

Embedded version 2

*Cano de armis et viro qui Troia Lavinium venit.
Aeneas iactatus est in mari et terris
et multa passus est (endured),
ob (= quod) iram Iunonis saevae.*

If the first version has been entirely readable, then students will be able to endure the new words in the second version long enough to incorporate them without abandoning them. Depending on the text and the students involved, a third version between the second and the original may be necessary. The 90 percent rule always dictates the practice of text and a particular audience of readers.

Original Version

*Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris
Italiam, fato profugus, Laviniaque venit*

*litora, multum ille et terris iactatus et alto
vi superum saevae memorem Iunonis ob iram.*

Assessments

A working principle of CI is that all output (speaking and writing) is the result of input (listening and reading). At some point from the middle of the first year onward, Latin students taught with CI (where the teacher has only one objective—to deliver understandable messages in Latin, every day) begin to speak in Latin, themselves. They also can be asked to write in Latin. The speaking and writing in Latin will be exactly what you would expect from small children learning to speak a language—it will be comprised of one to three word responses, contain what we know to be grammatical errors, and it will also communicate. Teachers new to CI often want to know how they can move their students on to more complex sentences with better control of grammar. There is only one way to do that—by giving them more understandable messages in Latin through storytelling, reading and discussion in Latin. If we want their speaking and writing to be better, we must give them understandable messages via listening and readings much more frequently.

Some, if not most, Latin teachers will say that all they really want is for their students to be able to read Latin whether they ever speak or write it or not. That is an excellent goal and a primary one for most of us regardless of one's pedagogical approach. Many Latin teachers, unfortunately, have not learned how to read Latin themselves. Instead, they have become speed-translators and have very little experience of reading a Latin text that they fully understand in Latin without having to turn it into English. Students who learn Latin via CI methods do learn to read Latin as Latin at an appropriate level without having to translate. Let us be clear: translating any text of any language into one's native language in order to understand is not reading in that second language. Considering all the possible language goals, understanding, reading, speaking and writing, the only way human beings make progress in a language is through understandable messages in that language. When, in the clip above, I quietly move around and assess my students based on their playing of the game *Trigon* and staying in Latin, what I am really assessing is whether or not I provided them with enough comprehensible input in order to do what they are doing. When they are able to do what I set before them, I know that I have done what I needed to do, and I can give them all a good grade for what I see and hear. This would be an example of a daily grade or a formative assessment. I turn my ob-

servations into a mark in my gradebook. When they are not able to do what I have asked, it is for one reason: I have not provided them enough CI in Latin for that task. I must return to the classroom with more input. When my observations tell me that I have not provided enough CI, I give no marks in my gradebook, but plan for more CI before I do that. With all assessments, my plan is never to give an assessment until I deem that everyone in the room is ready to show progress. Students will demonstrate progress in differentiated ways, but to assess formally when it is clear that they are not ready to show progress is my error. All output is the result of input, and giving understandable input is my primary job.¹⁴

One of the most frequently asked questions at CI workshops is “what do your tests look like.” My practice of assessment is constantly evolving. When I learn of a way of assessing that promises to do a better job of allowing me to report a student’s progress accurately, I make changes. At this writing, I can describe, in addition to my comments below on writing, what typical formative and summative assessments in my classroom look like. Formative assessments are often just a list of recently acquired vocabulary, including idiomatic or chunked phrases (e.g. *huc et illuc*, *consilium capit*, *ad epistulam scribendam*). Next to each item is a blank for the student to give an English meaning. On this kind of assessment, I am looking to confirm that all students understand at least 80 percent of these words and phrases. I am not correcting for grammar, but basic meaning of the word or phrase. If a student writes “he got an idea” for *consilium capit*, I am not concerned that the student put it in past time. I am only interested that the student understands the basic meaning. I allow all the variety of possibilities that a word or expression might offer, as well. In this, I am following what is called the 80/80 rule. If 80 percent of the students score 80 percent or higher on the assessment, then I am confident that they are making progress, and I record those scores. If the numbers are less, then the assessment only serves to tell me that I have not given enough input. I don’t record those scores. Summative assessments always have the readings that we have done most recently, and they have comprehensions questions on them. I want to know if they understand what we have been reading. I no longer give unseen readings on summative assessments, and deem them inappropriate for those just learning the second language.

¹⁴ There is a fairly famous scholarly debate over the value of comprehensible input and comprehensible output that took place between Krashen and Swain. Ultimately, Swain acknowledges that input is a necessary precursor to the value of what she calls comprehensible output, and her observations about what happens inside the mind of the student around output can be helpful. Krashen (“Comprehensible Output”) summarizes the conversation [here](#).

My goal in every assessment is to document progress, not special ability to navigate something tricky. Those students who can navigate tricky passages will be given opportunities to do so, and they always do well on every assessment. Assessing in this way does not preclude offering enriching opportunities to the few who want and enjoy them. In the past, I created tests for the special who could handle tricks, and the remainder of the class performed poorly on them. By reversing my focus to the average learner and being willing to differentiate learning opportunities, everyone in the class makes progress, and my gradebook reports that.

Remembering that all output is a product of input, and given my conclusion that I will no longer assess grammar directly, what does a CI teacher do with student writing in Latin? Over several years, in our program we have developed what we call a “timed write portfolio” which we use with all levels of students. After we have spent time reading a story thoroughly at any level, we ask students to do a “timed write.” The TW gives students a set amount of time to write in Latin all that they can about the story. We urge them to write continuously, even if they have to repeat something. We tell them that we are only interested in what they can write about this story that we have just finished reading and discussing. For beginners, the TW might be only 5 minutes. By the fourth year, that may be 30 minutes or longer and include more than summarizing by asking students to do some comparison and contrast or other higher level thinking about the text in question. They will complain when they don’t have enough time to write, and the teacher can make adjustments to length of time. When they are finished with a TW, we ask them to count their words—all the words. They write that number at the top of the page and circle it. They have also written the date and the title of the story about which they are writing. They place these in a folder which we keep in the room. At the end of the semester, we give them a set of analytical questions, in English, to use to assess what they see in their portfolio. These include which writings are best and worst, what characteristics they think make for the best and the worst. We ask them to tell us whether the portfolio shows evidence of progress in Latin, and to cite evidence for their answer. We then ask them to give themselves a numeric grade and to explain the grade. Teachers then read each set of analytical remarks, consider the contents of the portfolio, and then either agree with the student’s grade, or give another one with written explanation for the change. The self-analysis is done in English.

This approach to output allows for differentiation. The student is being measured against his/her own success and capabilities. Students engage in metacogni-

tion as they explore what they have actually been able to do in the semester (and eventually over the years as these portfolios follow them through all courses). They are all always surprised at how much they have become able to do. The teacher is also being assessed, though this is our quiet little secret. If all output is a product of input, then what a student mines about his/her progress is also a report on how well the teacher delivered understandable messages in Latin. While we never ask them a single question in the analysis sheet about grammar, almost every student manages to comment at length about his/her growing strengths and remaining weaknesses in grammar. They are largely correct in their reports.

By contrast, in a major analysis of studies conducted on “the effect of error correction on the learners’ ability to write accurately,” Truscott concludes that error correction is a clear and dramatic failure. The performance of corrected groups of students as compared with those who were not corrected was so poor, in fact, that the question could be changed to “how harmful is error correction” (Truscott, 2007). By never correcting a student’s writing but then asking them to look at their own collected writing output over time, our students emerge each semester with renewed confidence that they not only can learn Latin, but with evidence that they are making progress. In fact, talking about their growing confidence in Latin shows up almost as often as their unsolicited comments on their use of grammar. Maleah’s increase from 23 words to 127 words may garner for her high marks just like Miguel’s increases from 75 words to 258 words in the same semester. They are being measured against themselves and can each identify how their Latin is improving with evidence from their portfolio.

While error corrections overwhelmingly produced negative, even harmful, results, the studies also show that students do benefit from content feedback. I have found that this can have two forms. First, if student writing is bad enough that I am not sure what it means, I can simply hand it back to a student and say: “could you look at this section and try and make it a little clearer to me?” Students routinely re-write with just that kind of content feedback and make their writing clearer. The other type of content feedback that I have given usually moves along a student who is stuck in simple structures. I might say: “you know, you do a good job of telling me who the characters in the story are. Can you add some detail about them?” Invariably, such a student steps up his/her writing game and begins to add interesting details.

I have offered here how I am applying best practices in assessment to the specific work of Comprehensible Input that we are using in our Latin program. I must reiterate that my own assessment practices are constantly evolving. I offer one final example. For nearly two decades, I have tried to write summative assessments focused on comprehension of Latin texts by writing the questions themselves in Latin. I was eager to demonstrate that Latin can be used at every corner to do the work we need to do in class in the target language. This continues to be true in my classes while we are reading and discussing a story or text. I most often ask questions and conduct those discussions in Latin but with a strong focus on keeping it all understandable. Every step of the way has safety nets which allow students to signal to me when they do not understand. It is my primary job to deliver understandable messages. What I have changed most recently is the language of the questions on summative assessments. I am now asking those questions in English about the Latin text. When I ask questions in English, therefore, the answer may be in English or Latin unless specifically identified. For example, what is the English equivalent of “*ad epistulam scribendam*” in line 4? Or, which Latin words indicate noises that occurred in the bath? Or, give a definition of *frugalitas* (which could be in English or Latin). I am doing this to ensure that when a student responds inaccurately it is because he/she does not understand the text and not because he/she does not understand the question. On a summative assessment, I am now convinced that questions in the target language obscure what a test result, especially a poor one, communicates. Up until that summative assessment, however, our classroom reading and discussions, questions and answers about a text are *Latine tantum*.

REALISTIC PROFICIENCIES

I will offer a little insight into what these fourth year students can and cannot do. These students, taught only this way for four years, can sit and write an assigned theme for 30-60 minutes in Latin. In that writing, they are capable of using gerundive purpose expressions, active and passive verbs, cum clauses and some conditional clauses with the subjunctive. Some use case endings more correctly than others. Some have, for example, recently begun to use the genitive very well for possession, and most use the accusative for direct objects. My conclusion is that case endings are much farther down the natural order of acquisition (cf. Krashen’s Five Hypotheses) than we would like to think. Students who can chant the case endings perfectly still use them incorrectly. The issue is not about knowing the endings or

even what they mean. It is, rather, how cases communicate. These students experience the ability to write about various things in Latin as a positive, enjoyable experience, and they are most often surprised at how much they write and how “immersed in Latin” they become as they do so. They most often report difficulty returning to English for their next class. On the other hand, some of these students do not know what “temporal clause” means. Some would be puzzled at talk of an ablative absolute, a gerundive purpose expression, a future less vivid conditional clause, and the future perfect indicative while others would not. They all read Latin with these structures in them without much difficulty at all. They speak and write with many of them with varying degrees of accuracy. Their variety of ability when it comes to speaking and writing (output) is an example of how CI naturally differentiates on a daily basis. I assess a student’s output against no one but him/herself. Has this student made progress in speaking and writing based on how he/she did a week ago, a month ago, a semester ago? How has that progress been aided (or not) by my input? When I speak using these structures, they understand. If they do not, they signal to me. Their lack of understanding is my problem because my nearly singular job in the classroom is to deliver understandable messages in the language. They do not all know the grammatical terms even though they understand the language they hear from me and read with me. At this level, they ask for and appreciate grammar discussion days, but not more than about 2-3 times per month.

A NOTE ABOUT GRAMMAR

I do discuss all of these grammatical structures with my Latin students. Here is how Comprehensible Input has re-shaped how I teach and assess grammar. I never explicitly talk about grammar with beginners unless they ask about it. When they do ask, I engage what is called “pop-up” grammar. That is, when a beginning student asks why *puella* has now become *puellam* I offer an explanation that takes less than 10 seconds: When it is *puella* she is the one doing the action in the sentence. She’s the subject, but when it is *puellam* she has become the object of something—either the verb, or a particular preposition. Does that make sense? The student almost always nods in agreement, and I go back to our Latin story, etc.

When students are consistently asking for more grammar, and in my experience that is somewhere toward the end of the first year or beginning of the second, I begin to do focused explicit grammar lessons. These lessons have some very specific aspects.

1. They come at regular intervals which are less often for second year (maybe once a month) and more often in third and fourth years (twice a month or once a week).
2. They are focused on one area: e.g. nouns, or verb tenses, or prepositions.
3. They are formatted in a slide show which can be shared with students after the session.
4. Students are assured that their notes will be allowed during all relaxed and extended writing assignments. In other words, they are creating their own little grammars, and they can use those grammars when grammars are supposed to be used—while editing one’s own work.
5. While I am always designing my teaching through CI as the grammar expert in the room, I no longer test grammar explicitly for the following reasons: No one retains grammar rules without constant study, and average human beings don’t do that. If we insist on assessing explicit grammar and grammar rules, we will prohibit average human beings from choosing or remaining in our programs. We largely have done that over the last century. If student retention and inclusion is important to us, we must reconsider what we do with and how we assess grammar. The program at our high school is now filled with average learners as well as special learners at both ends of the spectrum.
6. Grammar must serve understanding. If a student understands a cum-clause or a condition contrary to fact, does it matter whether he/she knows what to call it? To respond to the objections that I know will arise over this point, I am not arguing for a “dumbing down” of Latin instruction. I am pointing out that our most commonly stated goal—that of reading Latin—does not require being conversant in grammar categories. It requires understanding. Understanding comes through much understandable input. Explicit grammar instruction does not increase understanding of itself, and it only aids those who wish or need to edit their own work. If public speeches in Latin or published writings in Latin are not our goal for our students, asking them to pass tests on what to call a structure is a misguided requirement.
7. If we assess for understanding, we will also know whether the grammar we have taught is serving understanding or not.

CONCLUSION

Comprehensible Input as a theory with dozens of applications hold great hope for Latin programs for the present and the future. CI does place its demands on teachers who very likely did not learn Latin in this way. We have learned to speed translate and we have survived grammar-translation programs where most of our peers fell by the wayside. We are inclined to teach as we were taught. That presents a challenge. I am convinced by my experience with comprehensible input that we can learn to deliver understandable messages in Latin to any student who enrolls in our courses. Likewise, we can convince all the others in our institutions who have been helping us screen out the “incapable” that those rules no longer apply, that our classrooms are open for every kind of learner. These kinds of positive changes are happening in numerous programs, and the difficulties, challenges, successes and surprises are becoming, almost daily, a new school for all of us doing this work.

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APPENDIX 1. WORKING PRINCIPLES OF COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT FOR THE LATIN TEACHER

The group of Latin teachers from across the country that I have been working with have developed a set of guidelines that remind us of how we do this work.

1. It is impossible to prepare all kinds of students to read classical literature in 3-4 years. But it is possible to give them basic reading facility AND an enjoyable experience of reading Latin, which may encourage them to continue study, in school or on their own.
2. Every student has a right to experience being in a second (or third or fourth) language.
3. Latin teachers are not average learners and Latin is not different from other languages with its degree of inflection.
4. Students only make progress acquiring ability in ANY language, including Latin, when they receive regular and constant understandable messages in the target language.
5. One of the quickest ways to deliver an understandable message in Latin is to give an English equivalent for a new word or phrase and then continue delivering messages in Latin.
6. Language acquisition, including the assimilation and understanding of grammar, according to the latest brain research, happens unconsciously. Direct instruction involving grammar explanations and drills do not help students acquire Latin. While they may be useful in advanced stages of acquisition to develop editing skills, they really interfere with beginning and intermediate level students.
7. In particular, error correction does not have any significant influence on acquisition, but tends to put students on the defensive. Moreover, it encourages students to focus on the form (grammar) of the Latin and not the message, thereby inhibiting acquisition (Krashen, 2009 internet version, p. 116).
8. Vocabulary must be sheltered (limited) while grammar structures must not. (e.g. from the beginning, teachers can use nouns of any declension, verbs of any tense, mood, etc as long as they are delivering UNDERSTANDABLE messages with limited vocabulary).¹⁵
9. "Four percenters," both students and teachers, those whom

¹⁵ Keith Toda gives an excellent explanation of what limiting vocabulary looks like in a Latin classroom [here](#).

Krashen calls the “fringe” who love all things about language study, will interfere with their own language acquisition by their desire to focus on grammar study, translation, and language control. We have an obligation to help them (and ourselves) stay focused on principles of acquisition, namely, receiving understandable messages in Latin.

10. Reading Latin is to be distinguished from translating Latin or speed translating. In true reading, the student acquires the ability to understand the written Latin without the interference or help of English. This most often develops in stages. The experience is likened to ‘seeing squiggles on the page and seeing a movie in one’s head.’
11. Reading Latin advances acquisition only when it is interesting and just barely above the student’s current ability. No textbook currently in use in the US provides those kinds of readings, and so teachers are obligated to create and edit readings to fulfill this requirement.
12. A text is readable when students know 90+ percent of the words on the page.
13. Production, of any kind, does not advance acquisition. The only thing that advances acquisition is the daily, consistent delivery of understandable messages in Latin by the only expert in the room: the teacher. Production (speaking or writing in Latin) is always the result of input. If we want students to understand, read, speak or write more, we must give them more understandable input in Latin.
14. The fastest avenue of acquisition of a language happens through reading texts that are readable (cf #12) and compelling to the reader.

APPENDIX 2. *LUDI* UNIT MATERIALS

Listed here as links to google docs, you will find various pieces of the *Ludi* units I created for Latin 4 students. While this is not a full lesson plan by any means, it gives a look into the materials that I describe in use in the paper. The first Unit focused on gaming, *Trigon* and Seneca's description of life over the baths. The second unit focused on dice, *tali*, gambling and divination. Both incorporated a quotation from Quintilian and a concern for values that were mediated through gaming. The entire Google Docs folder may be accessed [here](#).

- [Seneca Passage](#) Excerpt includes *Epistula Lucilio* 56.1-2, 14b-15. This document includes all the sentences I prepared for dictations (fast track vocab acquisition) and two tiers of embedded readings. Scroll through document to see all of those items.
- [Dictatio Slides Presentation of Vocabulary for Seneca text](#) This dictation activity introduces the vocabulary students will need to approach the Seneca text with understanding.
- [Vocabulary list for game playing](#) This includes a link to the Wikipedia page on Roman games. I gleaned vocabulary from that page and made some decisions about which games I would be including in this unit. I developed a basic vocabulary list for game playing, included here.
- [Circling Vocabulary for game playing and the rules of Trigon](#) These were my notes for introducing the language of playing games in general and for teaching the rules of *Trigon*, the Roman ball game, in Latin.
- [Video short to use for circling and deepening grasp of gaming vocabulary](#) Includes link to YouTube video short I used and list of vocabulary I circled with this video.
- [Quintilian quotation](#) This statement from Quintilian is what I use to link game playing to what became a year long conversation about Roman virtues.
- [Dictation for learning the rules of Trigon plus writing assignment](#) This is a follow up to the circling activity above and ends with a writing assignment in which they ought to be able to reiterate the rules of the game for themselves.
- [Seneca Assessment](#) This free response assessment focuses on targeted vocabulary and comprehensions of the text in general.
- [Writing Assessment with Rubric](#) This was the last assessment of

the *Trigon*/Seneca unit. Full instructions and grading rubric are included.

- [Slide Show introducing Roman Gambling and Divination](#) Helps introduce vocabulary and understandable discussion about dice, knucklebones, gambling and divination.
- [Notes on *Aleae* from *Vicipaedia Latina*](#) Materials and images I used to build vocabulary for the slide show and our subsequent discussions about dice, *tali* and divination.
- [Four Day Lesson Plan](#) Materials gathered here were used over 4-5 days helping students acquire vocabulary, practice conditional clauses in a meaningful conversation, and practice divination on celebrities. See slide presentation below.
- [The Oracle of Limyra](#) My Latin translation of an English version of the Oracle of Limyra used with *Tali* so that we could do this form of divination and remain in Latin. The English are from <https://web.eecs.utk.edu/~mclennan/BA/GAO.html>.
- [Practice Divination](#) Students identified famous people with troubles. We spent two days compiling their stories in Latin, and then on the third day, using the instructions on the last slide and with an Oracle of Limyra in hand, they cast their divinations in small groups, took notes and turned them in to me. I then collated the divinations for each person. On the fourth day, we discussed, in Latin, which divinations seemed to be most appropriate for each person's troubles.
- [Formative Assessment on Culture](#) I gave this mid unit to make sure that everyone was understanding the cultural aspects of divination as we had been discussing in Latin. It is perfectly within the bounds of CI practice to do comprehension checks in English.
- [Summative Assessment on *Aleae*, *Tali* and Divination](#) This was not a long assessment, but it served to let me check their comprehension of the unit.

The following documents represent what I consider to be the surprising strength and the Achilles heel of this unit. The surprise is that I had not intended to work with virtues, but stumbling on the quotation from Quintilian about learning *mores* while playing inspired the idea and my own memory of working with and enjoying indices of virtues while in graduate school. The strength is that the discussion of virtues threaded itself through the entire year of Latin 4 from game playing to divination to Harry Potter. The weakness is that I compiled this material on the fly

and can only plead much subjective judgment on which virtues to include. I chose fifteen from multiple lists that I quickly searched out on the internet, fifteen because it seemed a workable number. I chose the ones that showed up most often and which I recognized from literature. My next project is to do a much better job researching which virtues I want to work with, establish some rationale for that, and rework this material. In the meantime, I did workout some interesting and useful approaches to “virtues work.”

- [Virtues List with English notes](#)
- [Sample Script for Circling with Virtues](#)
- [Slide Show: *Exemplares Virtutum*](#)
- [Slide Show of the 15 Virtues](#) Includes the virtue, a simple explanation of it and most often a quotation or paraphrase from Cicero or other authors who write about the virtue.