

# Communicative Approaches to Learning Latin: Voice and Tone in Learning Latin Terminations

by Grace Miller

## Introduction and rationale for the study

The concept of encouraging students to read the Latin text aloud before attempting a translation intrigued me at my placement school, as I had never encountered this approach when I was learning Latin as a student.

I conducted a series of 20-minute activities during my research sequence where students solely read the Latin aloud to each other in pairs, emphasising verb terminations and noun/adjective agreement, and finished with the students using this technique during their normal written translation practice, with one student reading the Latin aloud and the other translating.

I decided to collect data from three main sources: my own observations and informal discussions with both students and their teacher; written comments from both the Head of Department and the class' usual teacher explaining the rationale behind encouraging students to practise reading Latin aloud; and the two questionnaires that the students completed before and after the activities in my research sequence.

## School background/research environment

The school was a highly academically-selective state grammar school for boys

and its catchment area was very affluent. The Classics Department (made up of two teachers) was well-established within the school. From Year 7 students had three 45-minute lessons of Latin every fortnight.

I was immediately drawn to the Year 9 group of eight students (all predicted the highest grades 7 to 9 for GCSE) whom I began teaching in late January 2018. Their only language option at GCSE was Latin, and from the beginning I was impressed with their accurate pronunciation and knowledge of grammatical structures. None of the students had special educational needs or disabilities; there were two Pupil Premium students<sup>1</sup>. The textbooks used were Taylor's *Latin to GCSE Unit 2* (Cullen & Taylor, 2016) and *Latin Stories: A GCSE Reader* (Cullen, Dormandy and Taylor, 2011).

## Brief description of the data collection methodology.

I wanted my research to take place in as familiar an environment as possible for the students, and to hear their opinions on their own learning in an unbiased setting. I knew it would be impossible to isolate the students reading Latin aloud as they were so used to practising it in lessons, but I also did not see the point of doing so; I wanted my questionnaires to allow them to reflect on their Latin learning as a whole, not just the practice

of speaking Latin aloud and placing emphasis on verb endings and noun/adjective pairs (which was the focus of my lesson sequence).

## Brief description of the lesson sequence.

The teaching sequence took place during over a week in March 2018. Before the first activity, I outlined what we would be doing and handed out the initial questionnaire. We then completed the first activity (reading Latin aloud in pairs and placing emphasis on verb terminations and noun/adjective agreement) – using the first paragraph of ex. 7.34 'A military strike' from *Latin to GCSE Unit 2* (Cullen and Taylor, 2016).

The second activity included more of the same, but with less involvement from me. This time, the students were a little frustrated about not being allowed to consider a translation at the same time, so I modified the final activity to allow room for this, as I did not want them to become disengaged. Students then completed the final questionnaire before doing the last activity.

## Findings

I asked the class teacher to briefly explain the rationale behind asking students to read the Latin language aloud before

translating it. He suggested that there were four main benefits to this exercise: time, pronunciation, viewing it as a language, and practicality. Reading Latin aloud allows the students to get an overview of the passage before translating, which leads to what he described as ‘fewer basic errors’. He also argued that being able to correctly pronounce Latin text would aid students who wished to study Classics at university, as they would have more confidence quoting the text in an academic context. The Head of Department added that speaking Latin seems to give students ‘ownership’ of the language and added that it develops confidence because of the simple rules of pronunciation.

On the issues of practicality, the class teacher mentioned that he constantly reminds students to read the whole passage before translating, and that reading the text aloud helps with this. He finished with the following thought: ‘The ability to speak the language will have an enormous impact on one’s ability to read it. The reality is, however, that the investment of time and resources to bring this to an English classroom is just beyond the means of most departments.’

In the initial questionnaire, the students’ view of reading Latin aloud was positive, but the question of whether or not it was intrinsic to their learning divided opinions. The highest-attaining student was the most dismissive, stating it ‘didn’t strike [him] as particularly necessary’. Two students remained ambivalent, and the others stated that reading Latin aloud *did* make translations easier.

When commenting on how important they considered reading Latin aloud to be, five stated it was quite important or very important: it helped them to visualise word endings, to see

things that they had previously missed, and helped them spot noun/adjective agreement. The others were reluctant to say that speaking Latin was of no importance but argued that it was not a priority as it is not tested in an exam.

In the final questionnaire, the most divisive question was ‘Reading Latin aloud without considering a translation is pointless. How far do you agree with this statement?’ The two highest-attaining students both considered reading Latin aloud useful, whereas the two lowest-attaining students stated that it was pointless to read Latin aloud without considering a translation. The students who disagreed with the statement gave the following reasons to justify their answer:

Reading Latin aloud without considering a translation...

- Helps you to spot tenses and agreements/understand the Latin better;
- Is fun/interesting;
- Immerses you into the feelings of the character/narrator; and
- Familiarises you with Latin sentence structure.

## Conclusions and implications for future practice/ research.

Both the case study and lesson sequence were positive experiences, and I was encouraged by the thoughtful, measured responses given by the students when they evaluated their own learning. I was pleased to learn that they did enjoy reading Latin aloud and thought that they

would be less confident if they had no opportunity to do it at all. These findings aligned with the hypothesis that the practice helped to give students a greater sense of ownership over the language (and therefore developed their confidence) than if they simply read the text silently. I had also hypothesised that the practice of reading Latin aloud before translating would decrease the probability that students would overlook certain words, which a number of the students agreed with.

In terms of what these findings mean for the future, it is important to bear in mind that this case study was a particularly isolated incident, due to the nature of the school and the small class size. In spite of these restrictions, I believe that the findings are still deserving of merit: the students’ opinions and the teachers’ arguments correlated sufficiently, and my own experiences of learning Latin without reading it aloud reinforced my view that the practice develops students’ confidence. At the very least, it is a worthwhile activity for teachers to experiment with in their lessons in the future.

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<sup>1</sup>‘The pupil premium is additional funding for publicly funded schools in England. It is designed to help disadvantaged pupils of all abilities perform better, and close the gap between them and their peers.’ Department for Education (2018). Available online: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/pupil-premium-information-for-schools-and-alternative-provision-settings>. Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> September 2018.