

Research Article

Ways of reading: evaluating different approaches to reading Latin stories with a Year 9 class in a selective boys' school

Polly Philp

Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

Abstract

Before I started teacher training, my default approach to a story in a Latin textbook was to translate it into English. I assumed that this was how you best understood what was happening in the story, and how you showed that you understood. Although I had done other things as a learner myself, including comprehension exercises, my prevailing memory was of translation. Translation is a highly valued and prioritised skill, as seen in the weight given to it in examinations and assessments – though in my school placements I regularly see ‘translations’ that are near-incomprehensible ‘translationese’ rather than fluent English. This means that often after translating a sentence or passage – a very time-consuming activity – you can ask a student, ‘So, what does that mean? What’s going on here?’ and that student will struggle to explain. I therefore wanted to investigate other ways to approach Latin stories. I will not claim that we were reading Latin in the truest sense of reading (left to right, at normal speed, comprehending the Latin in Latin and not needing recourse to English), but the three approaches we explored did engage with the texts without requiring literal English translation.

Keywords: Latin, pedagogy, translation, reading-comprehension

Introduction

I taught three 55-minute lessons to a Year 9 Latin class (age 13) in a selective, all-boys state grammar school in Essex. There is some attainment range within the class, but as a whole, they are very high-attaining. Latin is compulsory in Years 7–9. There are 19 students in the class, and I have chosen to analyse the work of five students. I chose these students as a representative sample of the class, with the chosen five students offering a range of responses but also a small enough scale that is practical for analysis. According to the guidelines recommended by the British Educational Research Association (2018), I have anonymised the students’ names, using letters A–E.

- Student A is one of the most enthusiastic students in the class, who consistently and confidently contributes to class discussion and completes his work quickly and accurately by himself, and who is continuing Latin to GCSE;¹
- Student B is a quiet member of the class who sometimes works alone, sometimes in a pair;
- Student C is a confident student who contributes when interested, but often has to be prompted to engage with tasks, rather than chatting at the back of the class;
- Student D, who has Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), consistently and confidently makes contributions (especially in

language discussions), works by himself or in pairs/groups, and is continuing to GCSE;

- Student E, who has ASD and is one of the lowest-attaining students in the class, struggles with executive function, is very slow to complete tasks and must regularly be prompted to continuously engage with tasks, rarely makes contributions, and works with a partner if they are his friend.

We used *Suburani* Book 2 (Hands Up Education, 2020). So as not to disrupt the normal flow of lessons and keep the students on track, and because I thought that if my results suggested these approaches would be worth incorporating into my everyday practice it would be best to use my everyday resource, I planned the lesson around three stories in the chapter we had just started.

Literature review

I identified three main areas in my research on reading. First, I consider reading generally, not specific to any language, in terms of cognitive processes involved. Secondly, I explore some potential strategies and approaches, addressing different aspects of the complex task of reading. Here, I consider literature about reading comprehension generally, as well as Latin-specific strategies. Finally, I look for practical suggestions for reading tasks. One of my initial aims for this project was to explore alternatives to translation: thus, in this section, I explore the argument that translation is not really reading, and why different approaches to texts are necessary and fulfil different purposes.

I found a significant amount of literature on reading Latin specifically, but I have also considered Modern Foreign Language

Email: phphilp@gmail.com

Cite this article: Philp P (2024). Ways of reading: evaluating different approaches to reading Latin stories with a Year 9 class in a selective boys' school. *The Journal of Classics Teaching* 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631024001089>

(MFL) research, as second language acquisition research indicates that principles in language teaching are the same whether the language is modern or ancient, and because of different emphases in proposed approaches.

What is reading?

Reading is a complex, active process, which requires a variety of skills. Students (and teachers) may vary in their conscious awareness of the skills required to read. Much of the literature on the cognitive process of reading breaks it down into different tasks, and sometimes further subtasks. Taboada and Buehl (2012), gathering together various cognitive views of reading comprehension, define it as a problem-solving process of constructing meaning through interacting with a text, which involves both literal understanding and higher-order processes, including activation of a reader's prior knowledge. Grellet adds another dimension to the understanding, by suggesting that information should be extracted 'as efficiently as possible' (Grellet, 1981, 3). Grellet (1981) lists a variety of skills involved in reading, including but not limited to: deducing meaning; understanding explicit and implicit information; understanding relations within a sentence and between sentences; selective extraction of relevant points; skimming; and interpreting a text by going outside it. Hamilton (1991) lists four subtasks: decoding, literal comprehension, inferential comprehension, and comprehension monitoring; inferential comprehension is further broken down into three subtasks of integration, summarisation, and elaboration. In my school placements, I have noticed the interactions of these different skills, such as beginning students struggling to decode words because they have not yet grasped how Latin is an inflectional language; this then impacts their literal and inferential comprehension. Nouwens *et al.* (2021) also demonstrate how executive functions impact reading comprehension: such functions include working memory, inhibition, cognitive flexibility, and planning. Looking at this list of processes, tasks and functions, we see that a skill at which we have become unconsciously competent is incredibly complex, and that teaching students to read will require a range of approaches to make a complex task more manageable.

Reading approaches and strategies

Grellet (1981) defines and classifies reading comprehension exercises for teachers and material developers, illustrating various underlying principles in a range of examples in order to explain how tasks invite engagement with a text with varying degrees of complexity. In this general handbook on developing reading skills, Grellet (1981) notes that the reading process does not have to be an identical process every time (in the sense of the level of detail to extract, the speed of reading, the time spent on a passage); connected to this notion, and part of reading efficiently, is the argument that longer units of a text must be understood, not just individual units. This is because students otherwise become dependent on understanding every single sentence, and by focusing on individual units, are reluctant to make inferences based on preceding or subsequent information (Grellet, 1981). This general reading advice is echoed in Classics-specific writing on teaching reading. Gruber-Miller (2006), for instance, argues that by focusing only on accuracy at the sentence level, students are not learning to read Latin (and Greek) within their cultural contexts, and cannot recognise phrases or larger structures of meaning, because of a word-by-word approach. Similarly, Hoyos (1997), in a practical

manual on reading Latin, criticises such decoding, word-by-word strategies as not really reading as we understand it in our native or modern foreign languages; moreover, these strategies are time-consuming, can mean students do not understand broader meaning because they are focused on tiny details, and thus can be led astray by a single mistake. To focus more on the importance of prior knowledge, writers on reading Latin specifically often stress the importance of cultural background: Hamilton (1991) argues that higher-level skills are dependent on this knowledge, while Kitchell (2000) makes it central to his diagnosis of why students are unable to make the transition from confected, beginner Latin to authentic texts.

If reading should not be the same every time, what are the main ways of reading? Grellet (1981) gives four ways of reading: skimming, scanning, extensive reading, and intensive reading. McCaffrey (2006) notes that the chosen mode of reading should be made explicit, because different modes require different emphases in instruction. Variation is suitable, because our reading purposes and types of text are varied, and are suited to varying approaches (Grellet, 1981). In addition to Grellet's (1981) argument, based on what is appropriate to the texts, I have also observed how varying approaches keep students engaged, because of a degree of novelty and/or the activation of different skills. Hunt (2022) suggests some of these varying approaches: an efferent reading is to find out previously unknown information; an aesthetic reading is for artistic assessment; an analytical reading is to focus on how vocabulary and grammar encode meaning. A translation approach seems primarily concerned with analytical reading, but the range of approaches suggests stories can and should be read in multiple ways, appropriate to the learning objective.

Just as there is a range of cognitive processes involved in reading, there is a range of strategies which teachers can implement. Pre-reading could be looking at the text specifically, for grammar or information (Deagon, 2006); it could involve taking a step back, to place a reading in context, such as by summarising what has happened before, predicting what could happen next, or using clues like illustrations (McCaffrey, 2006). Hunt (2022) suggests developing and activating different schemata (i.e., 'scripts') in pre-reading activities, such as external schemata (existing knowledge), content schemata (understanding of the genre), or predictions schemata (understanding how a narrative unfolds). As well as pre-reading strategies, there are strategies for use during reading. Just as Grellet (1981) talks often of efficiency, Hamilton stresses the importance of reading speed: by going through a sentence too slowly, 'The hesitancy reduces the reader's ability to hold the whole idea together in one thought' (Hamilton, 1991, 168). In effect, proceeding too slowly through a sentence may overload the cognitive process. This is backed up by Nouwens *et al.*'s study on executive function, which showed that reading comprehension was 'significantly correlated' with working memory (Nouwens *et al.*, 2021, 12). Nouwens *et al.* (2021) investigated the direct and indirect effects of executive functions on the reading comprehension of fourth-grade children. Although this study was on young children working in their native language, the literature review within the article and the results offer valuable advice to practitioners in indicating the importance of executive function in comprehension skills.

While reading, comprehension monitoring is a useful tool for self-assessment: this may be as simple as checking what students have understood against what was expected from the text (Hamilton, 1991), or may be part of a more complex process of parsing, visualisation, and articulating expectations of structure and semantics (Markus and Pennell Ross, 2004). The idea of

articulating expectations also appears in the technique of paraphrasing, which shows ‘understanding of the structure and the relationship of words without seeing a complete sentence’ (Strasheim, 1970, 7). Hoyos (2006) similarly argues that readers should be highly aware of the structural logic and formatting of sentence structure, not getting lost in individual words but understanding how these individual words forecast or fulfil expectations in relation to the rest of the sentence. These various strategies therefore suggest that reading tasks should be varied, suited for different texts and purposes of reading, involve knowledge and processes beyond the text itself, and involve frequent (self-) assessment in the process of comprehension.

Reading activities

Is translating really reading? Hunt notes that translation is the ‘dominant mode of assessment for examinations’, and many conflate reading and translation as the same thing (Hunt, 2022, 63); similarly, Hoyos laments that it is taken for granted that ‘the route to understanding what a Latin writer is communicating is to translate it first’ (Hoyos, 1997, 3). Some writers, such as Strasheim, suggest that translation is a ‘necessary teaching and learning strategy’ in the development of the ability to read Latin (Strasheim, 1970, 1–2), and indeed it is a common classroom activity. However, Hoyos warns against translation as a tool for understanding, arguing that we should avoid the idea that Latin is understood only by the reader’s only language, which is ‘killing to any in-depth comprehension of a text’ (Hoyos, 1997, 141; 2006, 3). So, though translation is a common activity, and certainly has its place in the Latin classroom, it is just one way to access the meaning of a written text, and there are various other, better approaches which can ‘breathe life’ into a text (Markus and Pennell Ross, 2004, 91–2). Further argument against translation as a reading approach is that it is not adequate for assessment. Hoyos outlines standard defences of translation, including that it is the ‘only precise way to test how well or ill a student understands a given passage’, which can then be conveniently expressed in terms of comparable marks (2006, 4). However, translation often results in meaningless ‘translationese’, incomprehensible to the student who has created it (Markus and Pennell Ross, 2004, 82). This certainly chimes with my experience in the classroom, as students read back to me a tangled sentence which they are then unable to extract meaning from. Translation, with no follow-up activity (e.g. a summary or comprehension questions), is often in fact not testing comprehension or prompting meaningful, communicative practice, but is a tool of grammar instruction and practice. Grammar instruction and practice may well be a significant part of language teaching and learning, but it is not the same as reading.

There is a range of literature on reading activities for comprehension of a native language, English as a second language, modern foreign languages, and Latin specifically. Extensive reading (Bamford and Day, 2004) involves reading high quantities of text, below or at the reader’s current level; subsets of extensive reading are Sustained Silent Reading and Free Voluntary Reading (FVR). These could involve reading novellas, which students choose themselves and discard if they are not interesting or are too difficult; it is suggested that FVR does not include any ‘accountability measures’, so the students (and teacher) just read, for their own enjoyment (Hunt, 2022). Hoyos (1997, 2006) and Markus and Pennell Ross (2004) offer techniques for linear reading, i.e. reading texts from left-to-right – this is perhaps just the beginning of a reading task, to establish meaning, and is not

suggestive or prescriptive of specific follow-up activities. Markus and Pennell Ross (2004), as well as detailing the process of ‘articulating expectations’, suggest approaching a text as a movie script: students read and visualise a text individually, and then compare, correct and modify each other’s interpretations, ‘not just from the viewpoint of grammar, word-ending, and historical/cultural background, but also from the viewpoint of interpretative bias (literal, metaphorical, ideological, etc.)’ (Markus and Pennell Ross, 2004, 91–2). A creative approach like a script therefore emphasises to students that they should care about more than just precise understanding of linguistic features: the meaning of a story, and the implications and interpretations of that meaning, are important too.

Another option is a tiered or embedded reading, where the original text is adapted to be more comprehensible (Hunt, 2022). One further option could be narrow reading. Here, I am not taking narrow reading as extensive reading in one genre or one topic, as per Krashen (2004) or Bryan (2011). Rather, this is an activity which has the student re-reading a passage, in different ways, cumulatively building vocabulary knowledge and developing reading skills, incorporating skimming and scanning pre-reading strategies, and asking questions first to build up basic understanding of a passage, before proceeding to more inferential comprehension (Smith and Conti, 2016 in Hunt, 2022, 85). There is therefore a range of potential activities and approaches to reading to consider, instead of (or in addition to) translation.

Research questions

Since reading is a complex activity, a range of approaches, strategies and tasks allows students to consider different aspects of the reading process, making it more manageable and texts more comprehensible. I therefore focused my research on the following questions:

1. What approaches promote the most engagement with a story, and allow students to demonstrate their understanding of the story?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of these approaches over translation?

Teaching sequence

Before my project lessons, we started Chapter 19 *libertas* of *Suburani* Book 2 which concerns the characters Gisco, Ampliatus, Quartilla and Indus. We had already read the first story of the chapter, with a mixture of reading as a class, led by me, and translation by the students.

Lesson one

We began this lesson by consolidating some recently learnt grammar, 3rd and 4th conjugation futures, and set the context of the story by recapping what we remembered about the character of Quartilla. The lesson objective was to explore Quartilla’s character and situation in the story *Umbricia Fortunata*. In this story, after a water leak and clumsy plumber cause chaos, Quartilla takes a pottery fragment to her friend Umbricia Fortunata, who reads an ancient *garum* recipe on it. I started the project with a standard set of comprehension questions, in a format familiar to the students. The students worked, as usual, individually or in pairs or small groups. We went through the answers to the first five questions in the class.

Lesson two

This lesson's objective was to explore the developing nature of Gisco and Ampliatius' patron-client relationship, which had been set up in previous stories: we therefore began by contextualising the story by recapping the events of the earlier story, *salutatio*. Inspired by Deagon (2006) and Hunt (2022), I started with a pre-reading activity: just based on the glossed vocabulary in the textbook, what might happen in the story *pittacia*? We then proceeded to the main reading approach of the lesson. In the story, Currax delivers some wine for his master Gisco, and stumbles upon a label-switching plot by Gisco's patron, Ampliatius.

I created my narrow reading exercise based on the format of Smith and Conti, and following an example of the format in Hunt (2022, 86–87). I also adapted some questions from the comprehension exercise available on *Suburani* online. Narrow reading is of interest because it involves several different approaches to reading: skimming and scanning pre-reading activities, but also more intensive reading for comprehension, as well as prompting students to higher-order thinking by, for instance, reflecting on why a character might have acted in a certain way, evaluating a character's personality, and predicting what might happen next.

Lesson three

This lesson was meant to set up and begin the third approach of my project, but was disrupted because of tutor group photos. I therefore only had about ten minutes to set up the mystery and intrigue of the story *condicio*. I led them through the first ten lines of the story by reading the story at the front of the class, calling on students with grammar, vocabulary and comprehension questions to establish the meaning. I also asked how the language was creating a sense of mystery and suspense.

Lesson four

The objectives of this lesson were to develop the storyline of the plot against Nero, and for students to show their understanding of the story in a creative way. I intended to see whether the students made imaginative inferences, predictions, interpretations etc., e.g. about how the characters would feel, and how much detail they went into in their representation of a flashback portion of the story.

We were not in our usual classroom, as I booked a computer room, so the students could use a word processor, PowerPoint, Publisher, or online storyboard tools (e.g. Canva). They could also use the online 'Activebook' version of *Suburani*, which allows users to click on vocabulary to reveal definitions and grammatical glossing. After recapping the beginning of the story that we had read in the previous lesson, I set the creative task, and students worked individually on computers to complete it. This was the only approach that required individual work. The students could consult each other about the meaning of the story, but they had to make their own decisions about how to represent it.

I decided to give two options for the creative response: a storyboard/comic strip, or a play/film script. I offered a choice for multiple reasons. First, I was inspired by the idea of visualisation through a film script, as described in Markus and Pennell Ross (2004). However, I also wanted the students to have a choice, because from personal experience I know that some people are unwilling to draw and prefer writing (or vice versa), and because a degree of choice would give them more of an opportunity for personal expression. Finally, I decided on a storyboard because of

discussion with my mentor, as she said that they had made storyboards before, and enjoyed it.

Research methods

My first research question was about engagement with and understanding of a story, which cannot be demonstrated quantitatively. I take 'engagement' to mean students interact with a text in higher-order ways, i.e. not simply translating with no further demonstration of understanding, or identifying a word or phrase, but, for instance, interpreting a text and offering evidence in support of that interpretation. I was not concerned with quantifying precision of translation or measuring analytical explanations of the language of a story, but rather how students were engaging with the plot and characters in a sequence of stories. Furthermore, in respect to my second research question, about the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches over translation, again I did not think this could be represented quantitatively. I therefore decided to use observation and documentary evidence to collect data.

Observations

I decided participant observation was suited to my project: the researcher is able to anticipate in the normal setting, and engages in holistic observation (Denscombe, 2017, 235–6). I therefore made some notes in the lessons, when I was not otherwise teaching or interacting with students. Gibbs argues that, in qualitative research, 'there is no separation of data collection and data analysis. Analysis can, and should start in the field.' (2018, 4). Thus in my observations I noted who was working individually or in pairs, who was proceeding through the tasks quickly, etc., and I reflected on whether the nature of the reading approach was making an impact on these things. I also wrote reflections immediately after each lesson. However, since these field notes would only produce a limited amount of evidence, I decided I would additionally collect data through documentary evidence.

Documentary evidence

Baumfield *et al.* (2013) suggest pragmatism in matching research questions with evidence that is available and practical to collect. Thus, the classwork and homework produced by the students are my primary source of data.

Discourse analysis

In my analysis of the data, I utilise discourse analysis, which is an approach to qualitative data which 'focuses on the *implied meaning* of the text rather than its explicit content' (Denscombe, 2017, 317, *his italics*).

Limitations

There are some limitations to my research: I trialled each approach only once, with one group, and with generally the same kinds of texts (in contrast to using other kinds of texts like letters or orations). The students also used different tools for the creative task, namely the online vocabulary tool and programs for their responses, so the timings of each activity (an important practical concern in the classroom) are not easily comparable.

Data and analysis

In this section, I present extracts from the work samples of five students, as described in the introduction. I complement the

documentary evidence with my observation notes and reflections. In my analysis, I consider both RQ1 and RQ2 at the same time, as the answer to the former has bearing on the latter. I present data from three of the four lessons, according to each approach: comprehension, narrow reading, and creative response.

Comprehension

I suggest here a range of types that the following comprehension questions could be divided into, with illustrative examples, and analyse what kind of engagement these questions prompt, and how students are able to show their understanding of the text in their responses. I also present some relevant sample answers, and analyse the student responses. Analysing questions is a productive way to evaluate engagement. Chin and Langsford (2004) distinguish between different types of questions. Closed questions have limited acceptable answers, and can be subdivided into cognitive memory questions – focusing on factual recall – and convergent questions, e.g. compare/contrast or making a judgement (Chin and Langsford, 2004, 16). Open questions, in contrast, elicit a wider range of responses and potentially stimulate higher-order thinking (Chin and Langsford, 2004, 17). This study addresses questions asked in a science context, but we can still apply the ideas to questioning in general.

In the *Umbricia Fortunata* exercise, there are translation questions, of various types.

1. Best fit: select the most appropriate word.
2. Multiple-choice: pick the correct translation for a short sentence.
3. Comparison: how is one sentence different from another.
4. Longer translation: translate a whole sentence.

For all these questions, students have to identify appropriate Latin words, or demonstrate precision in their translation.

There are closed, factual questions, essentially checking literal comprehension of the text, of the ‘what, where, who’ variety. For example, ‘4(ii) What happened to the jars? (3 marks)’ and ‘11(i) When did Umbricia suggest they should carry out her plan? (1 mark)’. These questions also essentially ask for translation, but specifically guide the students in understanding, because from the English question, they are being directed to make specific comprehension checks. Strikingly, almost every student made the same mistake for 4(ii). Student B wrote, ‘They fell and broke into fragments’, Student D wrote, ‘The jars fell and broke’, and Student A wrote, ‘They fell and broke into fragments’. The Latin, however, says that ‘Stallianus fell on [the jars] and broke them’. So, all students got the sense that the jars broke, but missed that Stallianus was responsible. However, a later question, 5(ii), asks about Quartilla’s changed feelings: Student D and Student B wrote, ‘Because Stallianus broke the jars’, though Student A answered, ‘She is told that she will have to wait’. Thus, in two cases, though there was an accuracy error, some students were still able to demonstrate understanding of the story in a later question about explaining a character’s response. If the objective of reading the story was focused on accuracy of translation, all students would be penalised, and it would be unclear if they did understand the story, but with a follow-up question, they have the chance to show that they did.

There are also closed factual questions of an ‘explain why’ type, where the student has to show they understand cause and effect of actions within the story. For example, ‘7(iii) Explain why she felt like this (4 marks)’. This follows from a translation question,

identifying that Quartilla feels ‘sad’ – so, the higher-order question proceeds from a question establishing the facts. Although this question carries four marks, most students simply wrote that she wanted to free Currax (Students D, B, C, and E), without adding that she is too poor to do this. I would conjecture that this is because the Latin reads *nam Currācem liberāre maximē cupiō. quam pauper sum, Umbricia!* [For I really want to free Currax. How poor I am, Umbricia!] It seems that they read the first sentence, and assumed that this was the relevant information, and so did not go on to the next sentence for more detail. Only Student A included that she was too poor in his answer.

So far, I have considered what I would judge as lower-order questions. A higher-order question type is one which requires inference, or a student to make a personal judgement, explaining why something happened (as in 5(ii), mentioned above). An example of inference based on information within the text is ‘3. *O, pedes mei!* [O, my feet!]; why do you think Quartilla said this?’ (1 mark). Based on the preceding events, all students answered that it was because her feet were wet. This is not explicitly stated, but the situation – burst pipes flooding the shop – implies it; it is what Chin and Langsford (2004) might describe as a convergent closed question. An inference question, based on knowledge beyond the text, is 6(iii) ‘What skill can we assume Quartilla did not have?’ (1 mark). This follows a factual question, about Quartilla’s intention to take a pottery fragment for her friend to read. All students answered reading/literacy, showing their understanding not just of the implications of the story, but also their cultural knowledge about the likely education of enslaved people in Ancient Rome. The final question, 13., also explicitly tells the student to ‘Give a reason for your answer’ in a judgement comparing the two characters’ confidence (2 marks). These are higher-order skills – comparing and justifying. However, most students only gave a simple answer, e.g. Student C wrote, ‘Umbricia because she tells Quartilla to believe her!’. Student A gave slightly more detail: ‘Umbricia – Q is having doubts, while U is convinced it will work.’ In both cases, the students achieved the two marks, and demonstrated their comprehension of the story and accurate assessment of the characters’ behaviour.

In addition to this documentary analysis, I would add from my observation and reflection notes, that not everyone finished within the lesson time. Students A, C and D did, but Student B only got as far as 7(ii), which took him to about halfway through the story, and Student E only did the first five questions, about a third of the way through the story. This means that they did not take in the story as a whole in one session. Student B, using the online textbook at home, had the support of the online vocabulary tool to help him, but could not get help or support from me or his peers. Student E, who is poorly-organised, in fact lost his sheet, and had to do the whole thing over again from scratch, which he then handed in late, and so got feedback late, too. Of the 19 students, only eight finished within the lesson. So, though the 50-mark comprehension is very thorough, covering the whole text, a potential disadvantage is that students who work more slowly are not able to complete it in one go, which may affect their overall comprehension because of the disruption of the reading process.

In summary, the comprehension exercise requires a variety of lower- and higher-order reading skills, and assists students in their comprehension of the text, as well as allowing them to demonstrate it. The focus of the exercise is not precise grammatical or linguistic understanding, though there is still some translation involved. There is coverage of the entire story, but it is a long exercise which may be too detailed for completion in one sitting.

Narrow reading

Q1 of this exercise is to find the Latin for given English words or phrases. Breaking up the task into these chunks may ease the burden on executive function: by finding vocabulary beforehand, the students will then be able to proceed through their reading with greater ease. This approach seemed to work particularly well for Student E, a student with ASD. We have tried various strategies before to support his working speed. For the first time this lesson, he used the *Suburani* Activebook on his phone, so he was able to click on Latin words for vocabulary glosses, rather than flick between the front and back of the textbook, which for him is often a time-consuming process. However, with the vocabulary tool, I observed him speedily work through the first question. For students without use of the online tool, e.g. Students C and B, the task required scanning through the whole text and making deliberate selections: in theory, students could look up every single word, but I did not think they would be inclined to this time-consuming task; also, they already knew some of the vocabulary. Even if they did look up extra words, this would still potentially fill in gaps in their knowledge. Finding the Latin from the English invites consideration of form as well as meaning: for instance, ‘!’ suggests looking for an imperative; ‘were carrying away’ suggests looking for a verb. As I circulated, I observed Student A making these logical decisions; others I helped, such as with Student C, drawing attention to how verb endings could be a clue that the word is worth looking up.

Q2 prompts similar engagement with the text as analogous questions analysed in the comprehension approach, such as demonstrating understanding of how the plot develops (see Supplementary Appendix 1 for details). However, by the time students get to this question, they have already found the definitions of previously unknown vocabulary. They also understand the overall plot of the whole text, meaning that even if a student did not finish Q3 and 4, the higher-order questions, they would still leave with an understanding of the whole story, not just some of it. This contrasts with the comprehension task: as noted above, Student B annotated his paper to show that he only completed about half of the questions within the lesson, and Student E completed even fewer. With the narrow reading, however, every single student in the class had completed this question within the first half of the lesson; all of my sample students completed the whole exercise within the lesson.

Q3 and 4 contain more convergent closed questions, and open questions. For instance, 3b. ‘Why do you think Currax obeyed the orders?’ received multiple responses: Student C said, ‘Because Currax is still a slave’; Student D conjectured, ‘Because Currax is being a spy for Gisco’; and Student E suggested, ‘He was scared of Nymphius.’ These are all plausible answers, but each one is prioritising different ideas, and shows engagement with Currax’s characterisation.

Q4 asks higher-order questions, requiring the students’ personal judgements of characters and inferences based on action within the story, but also recall of events in previous stories. For instance, 4a. ‘How would you describe the character of Nymphius?’ requires students to interpret his characterisation within the story. There were a range of judgements: Student E wrote, ‘He is cruel and ruthless’ which is a short but full answer; Student A listed several attributes, ‘Snappy, bad mannered, exploitative, rude’; Student D gave more detail, ‘Someone who will do what their master tells them, but is rude to anyone who gets in their way’ demonstrating an awareness of nuance in how the master-slave relationship may affect his behaviour. There is also a prediction question: 4d. ‘How

do you think Gisco will react?’. This requires students to recall what they already know about Gisco and his relationship with Currax. There was variation in detail, but most predicted anger: Student E wrote, ‘he will be upset and extremely angry at ampliatus [*sic*]’; Student D predicted, ‘He will cut ties with Ampliatus and he will be very surprised and angry’; and Student C wrote, ‘Gisco will be very angry and disappointed’. Though short responses, these suggest an understanding of the significance of the patron-client relationship, and insight into how much of a blow this will be to Gisco.

As I created this narrow reading exercise, it is important to be self-critical about the quality of the questions. Jones *et al.*, argue that effective questions are clear and concise, without complicated syntax or vocabulary (2009, 3). If I repeated this approach, I would change the phrasing of some questions. For instance, 2c. ‘What would *illa pittacia* have said, and what would *haec pittacia* have said? Answer in English.’ This question was meant to prompt students to understand which label each pronoun referred to, and so identify which one was Gisco’s wine, and which Ampliatus’. However, several students – and even my mentor who was giving the exercise a go – simply translated the phrases. This confusion suggests the question could be worded more clearly. I could also have pushed students to further engage with the story by requiring the selection of evidence for the judgement questions, for instance by selecting a Latin word or phrase to illustrate their opinion of Nymphius.

In summary, the evidence suggests that narrow reading prompts engagement with the story, with a range of lower- and higher-order tasks, multiple opportunities for personal response, and a useful scaffolded structure that allows the students to take in the whole text, developing the detail of their understanding each time.

Creative task

The results of this approach offer more difficulty in analysis, because although there is written evidence to examine, there are also images. I will not make any aesthetic judgements here; rather, I will consider details like image selection, annotations and so on. I will present my analysis according to theme, i.e. features common to the creative responses, whether storyboard or script: inclusion of detail; transformation of indirect speech; elaboration; and predictions and cliffhangers.

Students A, C and E created storyboards; Students B and D wrote scripts. All five samples represented the broad story: the approach of strangers, who report to Indus a plot against Nero, and offer him money to join him. However, there was a range in the level of detail, notably in the scene-setting. Student A, who drew a storyboard with a pen on his tablet, illustrated heavy rain, but did not indicate the night-time setting, or location of the Esquiline Hill; however, he did include annotations such as ‘whispering’ to indicate the quality of speech. Student C did not include the rain or location, but did include darkness in his caption. Student E translated the phrases about the night and rain, and snipped the relevant part of the illustration on the online textbook for his storyboard, but did not mention the location. Students D and B both included all these details in their stage directions. Perhaps the form of the storyboard was a limiting factor in demonstrating details of the text.

The Latin story includes indirect speech as part of Indus’ narration. In their scripts, Students D and B both transformed this into direct speech, as did Student A in his storyboard. Students D and A essentially translated into direct speech, whereas Student B embellished his version, which I consider in more detail below. Students C and E both kept the indirect speech, but paraphrased:

Student C: ‘The man believed that Nero was trying to destroy the public state and only Otho could look after Rome.’; Student E: ‘They told me that a person called Otho had a mighty army and much gold.’ All these representations suggest a certain degree of confidence with the meaning of the language, and perhaps that those who transformed it into direct speech were more confident about changing the language to be more appropriate to their form, whether in a speech bubble or in putting the words into the mouth of a character other than Indus. However, paraphrase still demonstrates a clear understanding of the main points of the text.

Generally, the scripts contained much more elaboration of the story than the storyboards. It may be difficult to add clear detail to images, especially when doing it on a computer, but all the storyboards had captions/annotations, and these did not have as much detail as the scripts. Student E did not manipulate the illustrations from the textbook beyond cropping the faces of relevant characters to match who was speaking, and his captions were either translations or paraphrase, with nothing extra other than the inference, ‘they said that nero [*sic*] was evil and had to be overthrown.’ However, he did also include panels setting up the context of the story, and the return to the present as Gisco and Indus discuss the plot, so the storyboard represents most of the story, not just the middle part. Student C selected a range of modern pictures, including a shot of McCauley Caulkin’s shocked face from *Home Alone*, a woman looking stressed while working at a laptop, and an emoji. His elaboration came in three panels offering potential endings to the story, to be discussed more below. Student A’s extra detail came in the annotation SPQR for Otho’s armies, demonstrating his own knowledge of an important Roman symbol. From observation, he spent a long time on certain illustrations, like a well-drawn face in one panel, and stacks of coins, but he did not embellish these with extra things he had imagined. By contrast, Students D and B significantly elaborated on the story, transforming ten lines of Latin into a page of A4. For example, in his stage directions, Student D added lots of information about emotion and facial expressions, such as ‘Young Men 2 & 3 gaze longingly at Indus, as if they need him to join the group’. Student B began, ‘It began one night, the rain was the loudest I’d ever heard it, and I could barely make out what was in front of me. T’was [*sic*] only me journeying through the Esquiline hill that night, or so I thought’. Here, as well as clearly embellishing the details, B. also added drama (‘or so I thought’) and chose the word ‘T’was’ to create a storytelling tone appropriate to English. Student B also elaborated on the brief mention of Nero in the Latin (*ille putavit Neronem rem publicam delere*) into ‘Nero abuses his power, he is a disgusting and repulsive man who cares only for himself. He would probably stab his own mother in the back for money’. This demonstrates imagination in his embellishment, and understanding of the characterisation of Nero in the thread of this story that has been developing since *Suburani* Book 1.

Finally, some of the sample students created a sense of drama with cliffhangers in the story, or possible predictions of what might happen next. Predictions suggest engagement with the story, because they show the student has understood the plot enough to consider its implications, and the characters enough to be able to guess how they might behave. Student C created a sense of drama for the final three panels of his storyboard, with capital letters and an effusive use of question marks, e.g. ‘WILL INDUS ACCEPT THE MONEY?????’ His other suggestions were refusal, or forced compliance. Though Student C did not go into much detail with these predictions, he had engaged with the drama and mystery of the plot. Student D finished the main task quite quickly, so as an

extension represented the end of the story, and then wrote a scene imagining what Gisco might say. Gisco and Indus agree that they will fight, and Gisco makes an impassioned speech about duty, finishing, ‘I wish to fight for what is right! (*All exit*)’. As Student C did, Student D here demonstrated a clear sense of the character and values of Gisco, as well a sense for the theatrical with his cliffhanger. Similarly, Student B imagined a final remark from a conspirator, with a sinister final touch: ‘There will be more, and you are only the beginning of something far greater than all of us, for the greater good of Rome.’ I was particularly impressed with Student B’s script, which shows not only his creative flare, but how much he was taking from the story – he is a very quiet member of the class, who very rarely volunteers answers, and I do not think I would get this much out of him verbally.

I think an advantage of a creative approach is the individuality of the product: you can have identical translations agreed upon by a pair, and be unsure who contributed what, but you will not find identical drawings or scripts. However, there are limitations. For instance, it is difficult to get all of the details without being too prescriptive about the scope of the task. It is also a time-consuming activity: a whole lesson, plus homework for Students B and E to finish, just to represent ten lines. There is also a limitation to this data: the students used the online vocabulary tool, which I am sure had an impact on the speed and ease of comprehension: I would need to try something similar again, without computers, to evaluate its impact on the task.

Conclusions

Reading is a complex task, involving a range of skills and lower- and higher-order processes. Not only might it be difficult for students to efficiently and accurately comprehend a text, but it is also difficult to construct tasks and approaches that best demonstrate students’ understanding of the story. Research for this project highlighted to me how many processes are involved, and how effective it can be to make those processes visible and approachable, emphasising that reading itself is a skill to be taught, developed and reflected upon, not something taken for granted.

My research into different approaches to reading Latin stories has shown that there are a range of ways to engage with a text, and demonstrate understanding of it, with questions and activities more accessible and personal than translation. An advantage of a creative response is the individuality involved, and the opportunity for personal expression: students can emphasise what aspect of the text they most engaged with in their representation of it. Ideally in a future lesson, the students will compare their own creative interpretations with each other, justifying their decisions and evaluating others’ (as per the suggestion of Markus and Pennell Ross, 2004, 91–2). Storyboards and scripts are also more inviting of paraphrase, which demonstrates a student’s understanding of the text without stilted English (though it can also include translation). Disadvantages, however, include the potential lack of detail (the lack of prescription weighed against being able to assess how much of the story the students understood), and how time-consuming it is. Analysis of the comprehension and narrow reading exercises suggests that they promote the most engagement with a story as a whole, with continuous comprehension monitoring and opportunities for personal response, and allow students to demonstrate this understanding through use of a range of different skills. In this study, the comprehension exercise was too long, leaving understanding of the text incomplete for some; however, the scaffolded approach of the narrow reading exercise meant all students had a grasp of the story as a whole, as well as engaging with higher-order processes. An

advantage of comprehensions and narrow reading is the limited amount of translation – which is not the same as reading, and should not be the primary tool for understanding. However, translation is nonetheless a major component of assessment for Latin, and so the skill does need to be practised and developed; in this respect, the comprehension questions have an advantage over the narrow reading approach, but it could be incorporated into a narrow reading question, or added as another stage.

I intend to continue exploring varying approaches to reading. I will experiment with pre- and post-reading strategies and activities, for language, content and structure, and reflect on what type of reading best suits the texts I use. I intend to develop more narrow reading exercises, for shorter and longer texts, and hone my ability to write the questions. I will not abandon translation, but conceptualise it more as a tool to check understanding, rather than the only or more important skill. This project has in particular demonstrated to me how comprehensions – oral and written – are a rich and effective way of understanding and engaging with stories.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631024001089>.

Note

1 GCSE are national qualifications taken in a range of subjects by students aged 16.

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