

Research Article

Forum

Pro Latinitate Activa: a student's perspective on Active Latin

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Abstract

Critics have argued that the Active¹ approach to Latin is not, in fact, an effective way to learn the language. This misconception appears to stem at least in part from misunderstandings regarding teaching methodology, such as the belief that teachers who use these methods neglect grammar or do not in fact introduce students to 'real' original Latin, but simplified versions of the texts created by the teachers themselves. As someone who learned Latin primarily through the Active Method, I can attest that this is an unrealistic representation. These methods are not used at the expense of formal grammar instruction; they are a different way of teaching grammar that also stresses the importance of acquiring a large vocabulary for the purpose of more fluent reading. Nor do such courses never progress to the reading of authentic Classical Latin. I will use online descriptions of Active Method courses to demonstrate this.

Keywords: spoken Latin, Latin pedagogy, grammar, Classical Latin, Active Latin

Does Active Latin aim to teach students to read real Latin?

Various schools and institutions use Active Latin to teach the Latin language, with the aim of allowing students to read instead of translate or to read first, then translate. Here I define 'reading' as the ability to see a sentence or phrase and comprehend the basic meaning, without having to translate into one's native language. Some critics have argued that instructors who teach through immersion neglect to teach grammar (Moran, 2022). Another common criticism is that students in Active Latin programs do not in fact progress to reading original Classical Latin works. For example, Jerome Moran (2022) writes:

If I understand it correctly, students of CI [Comprehensible Input] do not actually get to read the originals of most Classical Latin texts. It is acknowledged that these are too difficult for them (Moran, 2022, 124).

He bases this assumption on Patrick (2019). This, however, is an overly narrow view which does not reflect the reality of many programmes and classes.

At the Accademia Vivarium Novum, students progress from Ørberg's *Familia Romana* textbooks to selections from a wide variety of original Latin works from across the centuries. While this is of course not surprising considering the students of the Accademia live in a full immersion environment for nine months where their mistakes are corrected by both teachers and more advanced students, even people who take twice-weekly online

courses from the Vivarium Novum or similar classes from various institutes around the world can expect a generally similar curriculum. My focus will be programmes based in Italy, where I live, and adjacent countries.

Schola Latina teaches online Latin classes based on Ørberg's books. These classes incorporate selections from real Latin texts from an early stage. For advanced and intermediate students, they teach full-immersion Latin literature classes on works from different periods as well as composition courses. They also offer summer courses in Montella, Italy, aimed at the more advanced demographic. Schola Humanistica offers a variety of advanced Latin and Ancient Greek-language lectures on literature, which tend to involve both reading of unadapted, original text and discussions. They also provide private tutoring for all levels and host *conventicula* in Padua, where they are located, and, as of 2022, a Latin and Ancient Greek theatre competition called THALIA. In Spain, yearly 5-day-long ancient language immersion conferences are held by Cultura Clasica. These were originally intended for secondary school teachers, which is reflected in the demographics of the participants. The Latin conference is called CAELUM, while the Greek version is known as OURANOS. CAELUM follows a similar rationale as some of the classes described above. Less advanced students (A1–B2) attend classes based around Ørberg's textbook *Familia Romana*, while also reading selections of real literature, while the more advanced group (C1) solely reads and discusses ancient and Renaissance Latin literature. These categories refer to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages or CEFR and, within Europe, are applied to students of various living languages. Students at the A1–A2 level are considered 'basic users', B1–B2 'independent users', and C1–C2 'proficient users' ('The CEFR Levels', 2024).

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Cite this article: Lanzillotta L (2024). *Pro Latinitate Activa: a student's perspective on Active Latin*. *The Journal of Classics Teaching* 1–2. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S205863102400103X>

None of these organisations are schools in the sense of an ordinary secondary school or university, but many of their students are teachers at the secondary school level who aim to adopt similar methods of teaching. In the Accademia Vivarium Novum's online and summer classes the teachers regularly discuss pedagogy, explaining how the students can most effectively implement similar methods with their own students. These discussions often relate to the teaching of grammar and the reinforcement of new vocabulary. The website explicitly states that the beginner-level classes are for people who have never studied the language '...and for teachers who would like to learn (by participating in education in action) techniques for actively teaching the fundamentals of Latin morphology, syntax, and vocabulary in Latin'. I am personally acquainted with a number of Italian *licei* (secondary school) teachers who successfully base their own Latin classes on those of the Vivarium Novum, suggesting the model is replicable on a larger scale.

Many of Schola Latina's students are teachers, including some university professors. Various activities are proposed within the courses, which could theoretically be used by teachers. However, there is a less explicit focus on teaching pedagogy in Schola Latina's courses. Unlike the other institutes described in this article, they offer discounts for students under the age of 21, possibly suggesting that they intend to cater to this demographic. In the courses for beginners, the students read the textbook along with – at the more advanced level – excerpts from real Latin authors. The teacher quizzes them on the text in Latin, with the expectation that they also respond in Latin. Exercises from the textbook and expanded exercise book are completed in class, along with other activities and games. Some of the exercises pertain to grammar, while others are focused on comprehension of the text. Within the literature-based courses, students take turns reading out loud. They are then asked to summarise what they have read in Latin, with the teacher correcting or elaborating on their explanation. Background regarding the authors to be read, the context of the work, and other relevant details are provided in Latin at the beginning of the lesson. The most interactive classes are those on prose composition, in which the students are often broken into groups for activities, such as writing short written descriptions of pictures which are then corrected by the teacher. Written homework assignments in the prose composition course generally take the form of writing a short piece on a topic proposed by the teacher using phrases taken from that week's reading. Some composition courses also include lectures on advanced syntax with exercises to assess comprehension and provide practice in the correct use of more complicated constructions. These exercises are then graded by the teacher.

Schola Humanistica's online courses are less interactive than those of Schola Latina and generally take a more formal lecture format. Latin and Greek teachers are among their students. They are intended for students at the advanced level. There is occasionally some brief discussion after and before the lecture, although not to the extent seen in Schola Latina's courses. In the *conventiculum* THALIA, the classes are more varied in style and content, because their teachers are drawn from various institutions. For example, at THALIA 2024, one instructor gave a traditional lecture on Erasmus' *Adagia*, with no interactive activities, while – at the opposite end of the spectrum – another led a class in which small groups of students created an original story in Latin based on one of three basic plots which he proposed in the beginning of the class.

Cultura Clasica's CAELUM was originally intended to introduce Spanish Latin teachers to the Active Method of teaching Latin. The website describes the course as being for teachers of classical languages, amongst others. As of 2024, high school students between

the ages of 16 and 18 are also permitted to participate. The course offers classes which demonstrate the use of textbooks such as *Familia Romana*, while also allowing participants to interact with each other in Latin during shared meals and Latin-language tours of local attractions, such as museums. Of all the courses described, CAELUM is the most explicitly oriented towards training teachers.

Moran (2022) also appears to be under the impression that, in full immersion courses, grammar is taught through exposure as opposed to formal lessons. He states that,

Knowledge of the morphology, syntax, phonology, lexis and other formal features of the language will be acquired incidentally by usage, as required, and by direct instruction where necessary (Moran, 2022, 124).

In reality, Active Latin students are still expected to know the forms and to be able to discuss, e.g., what sort of ablative they are looking at. They are just given more tools for memorising and more thoroughly grasping these concepts. The greatest difference is that these discussions of grammar, syntax, and so on occur largely in Latin, although I have witnessed beginner-level immersion classes in which the teacher clarified matters in the vernacular. Spoken and written exercises teach grammar more thoroughly, rather than distracting from it. If students had no concept of grammar, they would not be able to read such a heavily inflected language. Conversely, knowing all the forms does not guarantee the ability to read in the sense defined above.

Conclusion

While I will not discount the possibility that some Active Method teachers fail to teach grammar to their students or neglect to introduce authentic texts, the online and summer courses described above start with a strong base in grammar before moving on to authentic texts. Progressing towards more fluently reading authentic Classical Latin is the end goal of these programmes.

Organizations mentioned

Accademia Vivarium Novum: <https://vivariumnovum.net/en/>
 Cultura Clasica: <https://culturaclasica.com/viii-caelum/>
 Schola Humanistica: <https://www.scholahumanistica.com/study/>
 Schola Latina: <https://scholalatina.it/en/scholae-latinae-online-latin-course/#>

Acknowledgments

The author received a scholarship to attend the Accademia Vivarium Novum's *Otia Latina*.

Note

1 I choose to use the term 'Active Latin' because students actively use the language. This active use includes writing as well as speaking, so 'spoken Latin' doesn't seem apt. 'Living Latin' is not quite right either given that Latin is a dead language. The fossilised status of Latin is what makes it so useful (Owens, 2016).

References

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