

Research Article

Forum

Latin and Greek in English Primary Schools – seedlings of a classical education

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Abstract

This article describes some of the main features of classical languages and history learning at the primary school level in England at the current time. It briefly examines the context and education policy background and government and teachers' beliefs in the value and status of classical subjects, especially the Latin language as an aid to learning other languages and as a support for developing and improving students' English literacy. There is some overlap with the literature review co-authored by Holmes-Henderson and Kelly for the British government (Holmes-Henderson and Kelly, 2022) and a recent piece by myself about provision of teaching and resources in the Bulletin of the Council of University Classics Departments (Hunt, 2022a). I hope to develop further some of these ideas and draw out some discussions about resources, pedagogy and learning aims for possible future directions of classical languages learning at the primary level.

Keywords: Primary Schools, Latin, ancient Greek, languages learning, Classics, Key Stage 2

Key Stage 2 Ancient Greeks and Romans

The present English National Curriculum dates from the wide-reaching reforms of the education system by the coalition government of 2010–2016. Unusually in education districts across the world, the government has shown a relatively positive attitude towards re-establishing classical subjects in state-maintained schools. At Key Stage 2 (in the primary school, ages 7–11) all students have to study the ancient Greeks ('Ancient Greece – a study of Greek life and achievements and their influence on the western world') and the Romans as part of the 'story of this island race' with a focus on invasion, Romanisation, and departure from Britain (for further details see Hunt, 2022a).

Schools may also offer Ancient Greek or Latin, for the compulsory Programme of Study for Foreign Languages. The most recent British Council Language Trends survey reported that of the 575 state primaries which responded (out of over 5,000 contacted), 2.3% were offering Latin or Ancient Greek, the highest it had ever seen, and the fourth most popular subject after French (72.4%), Spanish (29.1%) and German (4.6%) (British Council, 2023). This is a minority, to be sure, but a not insignificant one that rightly hit the national headlines with *The Times* newspaper splashing the news on its front page:

Those who predicted the death of Latin in state schools may have to perform a *mea culpa*. A revival of the language is under way, according to a report that says it is now the fourth most taught language at primary level in England.

Amo, amas, amat and all that is more popular than Chinese, the British Council has found. And Caesar's declaration of *veni, vidi, vici* could soon apply to German, as Latin is on course to overtake that as well.

"French continues to be the most taught language in primary schools but our data shows some diversification of the languages being offered, with Latin appearing in the top four for the first time – this will be welcome news for classicists," the report says (*The Times*, 2023).

The somewhat stereotypical traditional description of what passes for Latin teaching, as far as *The Times* sees it, is, of course, far from the truth in the classroom today. Teachers are more likely to borrow techniques from modern languages teaching than the chanting of charts and tables (at least in the experience of the author, who has taught several groups of staff in primary schools). While we can forgive *The Times* for its sentimentality and its appeal to its predominantly right-wing, aging audience through its mischaracterisation of modern Latin teaching, we need to exercise caution as a subject community that the stereotype does not become the reality. Why? Because at the very moment where many teachers in secondary schools seem to be beginning to

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grasp what it means to teach ancient languages as *languages* (using their increased knowledge of broadly communicative techniques) rather than codes, it would be a shame if their primary school sisters and brothers were obliviously going backwards to the grammar-grind of the past. For further reading, I suggest the following: authors from UK schools in Lloyd and Hunt (2021), to recent presentations at conferences at the University of Reading in 2023 and at Harrow School in 2022, to articles by Cooper (2023), Omrani (2023), Lanzillotta (2023), Letts (2021) and Hunt (forthcoming), and to the special edition of the *Journal of Classics Teaching* volume 20 (39), which demonstrate the appeal of active approaches to learning Latin and ancient Greek in UK schools today.

Back to the 2.3% figure, however. There is also very strong evidence from the charity Classics for All which reported in 2022 that it has been supporting some 627 primary schools to start, for the most part, Latin and (occasionally) Ancient Greek (Classics for All, 2022). This should represent a more accurate national figure.

Under the present Conservative government, since 2014, then, all students aged between 7 and 11 in state-maintained primary schools in England must learn a modern or an ancient language. Under this languages policy, therefore, which is designed to improve the uptake of modern languages in the secondary school, Latin and ancient Greek have been available to any students whose primary school wishes to provide them. This seems in contrast to most education systems on the continent, for example, where the ancient languages are often restricted to those in a particular type of (usually) academically selective school or for selected groups of students within schools (see Van Gils and Bracke in this issue). This languages policy, therefore, should be considered to be a thoroughly egalitarian one. Anyone who wishes to choose it may do so, if it is offered. And several well-known practitioners attest to the fact that Latin (and perhaps ancient Greek too) can be taught to all students if they adapt their teaching and use modern foreign languages techniques (Bell, 2018; Bracke, 2013, 2016, 2018, 2023; Maguire, 2012, 2018; Maguire and Hunt, 2014; Manolidou *et al.*, 2022; Robinson, 2018, and Manolidou and Goula, forthcoming).

But what is the reasoning behind providing ancient languages in primary schools? For the government, the Primary Languages Programme of Study argues for a distinctly utilitarian purpose: Latin and ancient Greek help other languages. Nick Gibb, the secretary of state for schools, said that learning an ancient language:

[...] shows us how the mechanics of language works. The English we speak today descends in part from the Vulgar Latin spoken by workers, merchants and legionaries. English is so riddled with exceptions to the rules that we need Latin to bring sense, order and structure to grammar. Latin gives us the skills to learn not just Romance languages like Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and French – but the aptitude and confidence to learn new tongues beyond Western Europe (Gibb, 2020).

Ancient languages seem to have been given status for their ability to act as help-maids to other languages. There is indeed evidence to suggest that learning a language in addition to one's own leads to a better understanding of how languages in general work (see, for example, Fox *et al.*, 2019). Learning Latin or ancient Greek, just like any other languages, can raise students' awareness of the importance of grammatical gender, cases and tenses in a range of Romance languages – features which are obscured or not present in English.

In essence, learning about one extra language may excite interest and understanding about others.

The question then turns not just to the propensity of the language for achieving this effect, but also towards the resources and teaching approaches employed in the classroom.

For the first, while there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that Latin (less so ancient Greek) is considered by teachers as a good foundation for the learning of modern languages, as to whether it is the best one, the research evidence is very slim and often based on the performance of self-selecting or high-academic achieving students (see Bracke and Bradshaw, 2017 for a thorough review of these). I might argue that, of all the commonly-used languages taught in English schools, Latin is perhaps an unusually transparent language, in which tenses and adjectival agreement are relatively easy to spot and to comprehend. It's also phonologically regular and simple, and the correspondence between the written word and the way it is spoken is demonstrably clear and easy to understand. Also, because Latin is not regularly spoken in the way that modern languages are students can concentrate on the written word – a process which enables students to have more time to study the language in their own time, rather than in the time of a live conversation. Latin might seem, therefore, to fit a pedagogical model of language learning which can promote close observation and knowledge of language features.

The second consideration (that of what teaching methodology might be best) is just as short of research evidence as the first. There are many 'Latins', ranging from sentence diagramming (Wing-Davey, 2018), through word roots (Huelin, forthcoming), to established course books like *Minimus* (Bell, 2018), to creative arts (Robinson, 2018). In consequence ancient languages' teaching methodology is subject to a wide number of variables. These include teachers' language subject knowledge, language proficiency, and pedagogical knowledge, the amount of time allocated for teaching and learning, and whether (broadly speaking) they use an overtly grammatical, reading or communicative approach (or a mix of all of them). In short, there is almost no consensus about how to teach the ancient languages.

In the Latin Excellence Programme at Key Stage 3 (early secondary school, with students aged 11–14), supported by a £4 million grant by the Department for Education, the resources that must be used by the participating schools are tightly bound to a particular teaching approach (Hunt, 2022b). The Programme's approach closely resembles that of the government-sponsored NCELP approach for modern foreign languages, which recommends teaching language as a highly-sequenced programme, starting with phonics, moving through lexis and then syntax.¹ The NCELP model has not found universal favour among teachers of modern foreign languages, many of whom prefer a more communicative approach or even a pedagogically-eclectic one, borrowing from several methodological traditions. Measurement of the success of the model promoted by the Latin Excellence Programme will no doubt be easy to achieve as all participating schools will follow the same pattern: the aim of this homogeneity of approach is to ensure that delivery of the Programme is sustainable when many of the teachers delivering it may not be specialist Latin teachers. But this is likely at a cost of teachers' loss of professional autonomy and choice. And for the vast majority of schools outside the Programme (which means everywhere else beyond the 40 participating schools), teachers may use their own professional judgement as to what is best for their own students in the situation in their own schools and for the students themselves.

Most resources at Key Stage 2 allow teachers to decide for themselves how much to read, write, listen, read aloud or speak. This may mean that precise learning outcomes may vary from one school to another. In my view, this is not a bad thing, as greater teacher autonomy tends to lead to greater job satisfaction, teacher motivation and enthusiasm, and better engagement and improved outcomes for students. Better to have a loose contract than something too centrally-controlled at this stage in a students' language learning journey; and teachers may more readily sign up for it.

Perhaps more interesting is that the Department for Education has not at all defined what constitutes a suitable course or aims and objectives for any of the languages teaching and learning at Key Stage 2. Such a laissez-faire approach provides cover for anything which goes on in schools, perhaps to their advantage, especially bearing in mind the lack of subject specialists at this level; but it barely amounts to much of a languages policy and foreshadows the lack of coherence of policy in the secondary schools.

For the present moment, then, Latin and ancient Greek are both subjects which may be taught by anyone to anyone for four years in primary schools. That's a pretty big opportunity to achieve something which we as subject members might want to promote when and if the present government changes.²

Ancient Greek or Latin?

Ancient Greek is perhaps more difficult as a 'sell' to primary school teachers, but it has some takers and enthusiasm seems high. Maintaining public awareness of the value of the study of ancient Greek and its accessibility is a key element (Holmes-Henderson, 2008; Mitropoulos and Holmes-Henderson, 2016; Wright, 2015; Bracke, 2015).

Basil Batrakhos and the Mystery Letter (Classics for All, 2019) is a broadly reading-comprehension approach in which students follow a continuous storyline centring on a puzzle in ancient Greek which they get to decipher with the eponymous frog. Innovative features include a form of trans-language, in which Greek letters and words are carefully and gradually drip-fed into an English narrative, until the student is able to read a complete ancient Greek story. Multiple exercises practise letter formation and word recognition, and simple grammar is explained. Background information about the ancient Greek world supplements the language work.

*Mega Greek*³ is a freely downloadable course comprising ten thematic lessons which combine foundation Greek language learning with work on ancient Greek civilisation and culture. There are also three 'taster' modules available (each comprising three lessons) that introduce pupils to a particular aspect of ancient Greek culture – 'Homer's Heroes', 'Professor Pythagoras' Magical Maths' and 'Speak Like the Gods'.

Latin has far more interest and appears to be much more accessible, sharing the same alphabet as English, of course. There are many resources to choose from, but the most widely available are given below.

Minimus (Bell, 1999) and *Minimus Secundus* (Bell, 2004) are some of the most popular course books for beginning Latin in use today. Based around archaeological finds at Vindolanda on Hadrian's Wall, the broadly story-based course makes use of cartoon strips to carry the Latin readings, with explanations of grammar and English word roots to follow. The stories are interspersed with information about the Roman world and Greek mythology. There is an accompanying website and supplementary

resources, including recordings, workbooks and a plethora of small mouse-inspired gifts.

The *Primary Latin Course*⁴ is a freely available online course that provides a gentle introduction to the Latin. The language learning is fully integrated into an immersive cultural and archaeological course set in ancient Herculaneum. The course is driven by photographs and evidence from the ancient site for pupils to explore and investigate exploiting digital media, such as touch-screen navigation and recorded spoken Latin. The interface is meant for whole-class teaching and aligns with much current practice in primary schools, where the focus for lesson delivery starts with the interactive whiteboard.

*Maximum Classics*⁵ is a similarly accessible digital course combining foundation Latin language learning with work on classical civilisation and culture. All materials (including PowerPoints, worksheets for students and teaching guides) are free to download for state-maintained schools. The course is also designed for whole-class teaching, with supplementary resources for individual work, with a strong emphasis on Latin-English word roots.⁶

Indeed, it is English word-roots more than anything else which seems to attract most interest from primary school teachers in offering Latin or ancient Greek. In addition to the courses named above, *Vocabulous* is a recently-developed website which addresses the interest directly (Huelin, forthcoming). Noting the frequency of Graeco-Latinate word roots in the tier two and three levels of English vocabulary (the academic, professional and scientific words), *Vocabulous* aims to capture students' interest in word-play at the primary age level and help them decode English meanings. English is, perhaps, unusual in having two different language registers: the Graeco-Latinate and the Germanic (Beck *et al.*, 2002). Mastery of the Graeco-Latinate has long been observed to be important to access the higher professional and social classes (Corson, 1985). The importance of this has been given great credence by this and past governments, in their efforts to improve the life skills and employment prospects of generations of schoolchildren. More prosaically, all students at the end of Key Stage 2 (aged 10) must sit Standard Attainment Tests (SATs) which assess their (and by association, their teachers') success at recognising specific points of English spelling, punctuation and grammar. My own research into the required spelling lists suggests that some 85% of words are Graeco-Latinate in origin, and the 2023 test asked students (among many other things) specifically about knowledge of the roots of the word 'inspect'. Accordingly, this somewhat microscopic testing of words looms large in the teaching of English in Key Stage 2.⁷ Latin and ancient Greek can be said to fulfil two aims: the foreign language component and English language knowledge.

In all, then, Latin and ancient Greek languages, and the civilisations which went with them, seem to have reached a stable position within the primary curriculum. Unusually for most anglophone education systems, the present government is supportive. The subject organisations need to be cultivating the next one. The present shadow education minister shows no particular sign of wanting root and branch reform. Instead, they seem to want to broaden rather than reduce the range of subjects at secondary; little has been said so far about primary, except that Early Years will take priority. The traditional antipathy of the Left towards Classics seems subdued⁸ and since the resignation of Boris Johnson from government, his use of Latin quotes and mottoes has become less of a stick with which the media might beat him (and us). But I do feel that there is more to be done, to be sure: if Latin

and ancient Greek are to be seen to be more than a help to other subjects (whether they be modern foreign languages or English literacy), that, to my mind, is too low an aspiration: we need to make the case more clearly, more strongly than at any time in the last 35 years. And we do have plenty of evidence now, through case studies gathered from Classics for All, that we can teach the subjects to everyone – not just to those in privileged social or academic positions. Through Classics for All, I've taught teachers in schools in socially-deprived areas of East London, Birmingham, Manchester and Kent. The students don't know that (supposedly) 'people like them' don't learn Latin (Hunt, 2018, 2020). Holmes-Henderson is finding compelling evidence for the continued inclusion of classical subjects in primary schools as it impacts on students' cognitive development (Holmes-Henderson, 2023). Research at Key Stage 3 also suggests the beneficial impact of learning about ancient mythology on students' English literacy development (Bloor *et al.*, 2023; Hamman, 2023).

We also have to tell outsiders that 'Latin' and 'ancient Greek' are not just languages. The uniqueness of the subjects 'Latin' and 'ancient Greek' lies in their combination of language, literature and social/political/military history (modified at various points in scale and proportion according to the age, depth of knowledge and sophistication of the students). That is something that needs to be made clear. The subjects provide a holistic way of learning about other people, and the very distance in time and space makes it easier to talk about the human condition safely and sensitively (even if the issues themselves are sometimes discomforting).⁹ It goes without saying that no ancients survive to be caused offence to! There is enough to talk about, enough to discuss – but not too much; and the gaps in our knowledge provide valuable opportunities for critical thinking, thereby promoting opportunities to debate, argue and persuade. To my mind, that is what the value of Classics is. Can we measure this? No! Can't we then just let Classics be Classics?

Notes

- 1 See <https://www.all-languages.org.uk/uncategorized/an-outline-of-the-work-of-ncelp> (accessed 26 July 2023).
- 2 The next General Election is due in 2024.
- 3 <https://maximumclassics.com/megagreek/> (accessed 26 July 2023).
- 4 <https://hands-up-education.org/primarylatin.html> (accessed 26 July 2023).
- 5 <https://maximumclassics.com/maximumclassics/> (accessed 26 July 2023).
- 6 <https://maximumclassics.com/word-roots/> (accessed 26 July 2023).
- 7 I say 'microscopic', because the approach of the test seems to out of all proportion to all the other ways in which students may learn or acquire knowledge of their own language, through, for example, reading, play, problem-solving, collaboration. Even some of the Department for Education's own advisers counselled against the grammar-testing approach used by the SATs exams (The Guardian, 2017).
- 8 See, for example, Labour's Education Secretary Charles Clarke's 2003 dismissal of Classics at University: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/2712833.stm> (accessed 26 July 2023).
- 9 See, for example, Hunt (2016) and Swallow (forthcoming).

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