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Triennium Linguae Latinae: a case study of introducing Latin to the Key Stage 3 timetable in a comprehensive school

Ian David McMillan

Independent Scholar, Belfast, UK

Abstract

A personal reflection on the experience of introducing Latin to the curriculum. School S. (non-selective, secondary) introduced Latin as a timetabled subject at Key Stage 3 between 2016 and 2019. This is a case study and personal reflection from the teacher who instigated and taught the course, comprising the extracurricular efforts which paved the way for the class, methodological considerations, an evaluation of the project, and the reasons why Latin was ultimately discontinued from the curriculum.

Keywords: Latin, Key Stage 3, *Cambridge Latin Course*, curriculum, extra-curricular, uptake, all-ability, Classics for All

Background and motivation

I teach modern languages in a non-selective secondary school. My classes are unstreamed and have a wide ability range. As a department, we get good results at GCSE, but a long-standing source of frustration is that relatively few students progress beyond GCSE and very few develop meaningful fluency. Nevertheless, it is my conviction that the experience of engaging with another language and culture is pedagogically worthwhile. So, having completed for my own personal benefit an Open University Diploma in Classical Studies, it occurred to me that, if they weren't attaining high levels of communicative oral competence anyway,[1] then my students might as well be studying Latin. Every Key Stage 3 student in the school studies two languages, so every one of my Latin students was also studying a modern foreign language.

I here note down my consideration at the time, as presented to the Principal of the school, of the advantages and disadvantages of introducing Latin to Key Stage 3:

Advantages

The Latin GCSE course has much less vocabulary to learn: the Eduqas GCSE lists 440 items of vocabulary, while the typical modern language specification lists 1300+ items,[2] and there are plans to increase this to 1700 items.[3]

Purely receptive linguistic engagement; although there is a prose composition option, no spontaneous language production is a requirement.

No speaking examination – my own experience is that students seem to find the speaking element in modern foreign languages examinations particularly stressful.

The stories are much more attractive and engaging: instead of boring transactional content like buying a train ticket or going to the market, Latin students engage with more stimulating historical and mythological narratives.

Latin has *kudos*, the kind of cultural capital from which my students from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds are often excluded.

Disadvantages

Coe (2008) suggested that Latin GCSE was 'the best part of a grade higher than the next hardest subject'. This perception of difficulty was still prevalent among Latin teaching professionals when we first introduced Latin to the timetable in 2016, with the result that even the local grammar schools opted for the WJEC Latin Level 2 qualification, which was perceived as being more accessible than the GCSE. The Latin Level 2 qualification has since been superseded by the Eduqas GCSE, but I recall having difficulties in 2016 explaining that our plan was to do a qualification which lacked the GCSE 'brand'.

Neither

Explicit knowledge of grammar terminology can be rewarded in the GCSE Latin exams. For example, the 2019 Eduqas paper contains questions requiring students to find a superlative adjective, a preposition and an infinitive. While these terms may typically be taught and used in a modern languages course, the terminology itself never features in the GCSE exams. I think that it is a good thing that knowledge of this terminology can be rewarded; not all students agree.

Before getting Latin on the timetable

Over a period of ten years, I trialled Latin on and off as an extracurricular offer in various forms. A breaktime club was too short, so I planned an after-school club. Numbers were small – small enough to enrol students for the *Cambridge Latin Course* (*CLC*) online independent learner provision. This seemed like a great option as I would, in theory, be able to get on with my own work while the learners worked at their own pace on the computers. I found the system well thought-out and the materials provided of high quality. The reality of the situation, however, was that my students, who were only 11 or 12 years old, did not have the technological skills, or the self-management or literacy skills to cope with this mode of learning. I found myself so engaged with supporting their efforts, that I quickly decided that I would be better teaching them directly myself. This progressed adequately for a while, but eventually numbers dwindled to the point where I felt the need to come up with a different solution.

Phase two, then, of extracurricular Latin was a series of whole-day intensive courses. This took greater planning and co-operation from the school management as it involved getting my classes covered for a day, and students would also be allowed out of their regular lessons to attend mine. By this time, I was well enough established as a teacher in my school to be allowed this type of indulgence. I visited Key Stage 3 classes advertising what I was planning and many more students wanted to participate: extra-curricular after school lessons suffered from being 'their time' rather than 'school time'. Additionally, any prospective change to the normal school routine was no doubt attractive. I needed resources, and applied to Friends of Classics for funds to buy some *CLC* textbooks. This was quickly granted without question – one of the easiest funding applications I have ever made! I typically gathered 15–20 students for a whole-day experience. These were rather intense for me, but generally enjoyable. The DVD of *CLC* Book one was available at this stage and I drew upon it heavily; the students responded particularly well to the various multi-media clips. As time progressed, however, gaining a good sense of progression became a challenge. I delivered about one whole-day of Latin per term, but each day needed a longer and longer recap of what had gone before, and as I looked towards the future the problem loomed of how would I start a new group while progressing with the current group?

Ultimately, I had shown enough dedication to my little obsession, and enough value to the school (parents were always quite impressed with the presence of Latin on Open Day) for me to persuade the school leadership to allow Latin to feature as a language option for incoming first-year students. This was a simple process: our school had had 4 language options and each incoming student selected two preferences: Latin simply was introduced as another option and it would stand or fall according to the free-market forces of the whims of 11-year-olds and their parents. That first year, ten students picked Latin: the Vice-Principal was impressed, but it was decided that this was not enough to justify a class.

The following year, I realised I had a job of PR to do, so I organised a little tour of our feeder primary schools. I had a nice power-point presentation, some jokes and fun activities, and I leaned heavily on the fact that the vocabulary requirement for Latin was quantifiably much less for Latin than for any modern language GCSE, and that no-one would ever require them to speak in Latin. And then it happened – suddenly, I had a Latin class due to begin the following September.

The first year

I would have 20 first-year students, a fairly standard class size in my school – we had invested in keeping classes small to facilitate all-ability teaching across as many subjects as possible. Now, a prime reason for my selection of the *CLC* as opposed to any other course was its wide range of free online materials in addition to the DVD of digital resources. The recurring subscription for the licence to use the DVD with a class was becoming a burden, but by this stage I was more familiar with the *CLC* than any other course, so I wanted to stay with it. Now that Latin was a 'real' subject rather than an extracurricular offer, school agreed to allow me a small budget rather than having to rely on charity from Friends of Classics.

There was enough material in the *CLC* for me to run a 'core' course which everyone in the class did, leaving out some of the stories and exercises, while those students who were particularly capable (about a quarter of the class) would also complete the work that the others left out. It soon became clear that, at assessment time, it would be necessary to have two assessment tiers. In theory, students were allowed to self-select which tier to do, but if I felt anyone was under-aspiring, I would give them a steer towards the harder paper (this did not happen very often). It became clear that a small number of students were extremely capable and coped well with everything that I could throw at them. A similar number of students found anything involving literacy extremely challenging – and there would be a lot of literacy work!

A couple of the students were what might be called 'naughty boys' and to this day I do not know if they chose Latin themselves, or if they were steered towards the class to make up numbers. On more than one occasion, teaching assistants raised their eyebrows or even explicitly wondered out loud at the value of these boys studying Latin, but in truth they caused no particular trouble. In their best moments, they even allowed themselves to become caught up in the sometimes-gruesome violence of the stories. Now, this never did carry over into significant linguistic progress, although every now and again they would surprise themselves. I have checked their marks and the boys in question received similar grades in both Latin and their modern language option, so it seems unlikely that taking Latin instead of a second modern language has harmed their overall educational outcomes.

By the end of the first year, we had covered a bit more than half of the first *CLC* book (Stages 1–6) and I thought things were going well with the class. Personal circumstances, however, meant that I had moved to a 4-day week, and this impacted on my ability to reach out to do PR work in the local primary schools. Unsurprisingly, this meant that the number of students in the incoming cohort who requested Latin dropped back to the point that subsequent classes became unviable. I knew exactly what the problem was, and how to solve it: I needed to get back into the primary schools with my PR spiel. There was, however, no-one else to do the outreach work, and I simply couldn't do it myself.

Methodological reflections

Bearing in mind the all-ability nature of the class, I used a wide range of activities in the first year or so of teaching, and I actively incorporated Classical Civilisation content into every assessment and advised the students in advance that there would be a section completely in English – an easy way to gain marks for anyone who felt that they were struggling with the language. While I generally found that students responded positively to creative and diverse activities, this did not automatically result in better exam grades. It was particularly noteworthy that those who attained least in the

linguistic sections of exams attained equally poorly in the all-English Classical Civilisation section.

I experimented briefly with introducing some productive techniques from my modern foreign languages teaching, but was met with pretty immediate resistance. Even asking students to read out loud, which seemed to me to be a good way to break the monotony of everyone listening to me, could create conflict, and eventually one student confronted me: 'You said we would have no oral exam, and we would never have to speak Latin for this class!' Oops – she was right; I had said that. I backed down, and we proceeded with only those who were happy to read participating, while the others listened.

As time progressed, I found that the most effective path was for me to worry less about trying to re-invent the wheel, and just to follow the *CLC* textbook. We finished Book 1 of the *CLC* during the second year, and the DVD along with it. There were nevertheless enough multi-media resources between the *CLC* website and other things on YouTube to maintain some variety in my lessons. As time progressed, however, I did note that our classroom routine increasingly focused on the textbook. Still, the book itself had a variety of stories, grammar and cultural awareness content to be reasonably interesting for the class. By the end of the third year, we were over half-way through Book 2 of the *CLC* (Stage 16).

I created my own end-of-term assessments, in several sections: vocabulary, grammar, Classical Civilisation, prepared translation, and unseen translation. The prepared translation would usually be, say, one of three paragraphs from the textbook and students would be advised in advance which paragraphs to revise. I usually wrote the Latin for the unseen translations myself: I found this challenging and enjoyable. I would base my paragraph fairly closely on sentences from the textbook, but I also posted my compositions on *reddit.com/r/latin* for specialists to check – and indeed, on a couple of occasions a mistake was found! In general, I found the Latin-teaching community to be extremely supportive of and generous towards non-specialist teachers of Latin.

Evaluation

To the extent that I believe I delivered a worthwhile educational experience to my Latin students, the introduction of Latin to our timetable was a success. At the end of Key Stage 3, my 20 students were offered the opportunity to progress their Latin studies through Key Stage 4: one student was extremely enthusiastic, her friend agreed to do it to keep her company, and there were a couple of non-committal 'maybes'. Ultimately, this was not enough to justify

running a GCSE course, and in the absence of a viable Key Stage 4 offer, the Principal of the school, with regret, made the decision to cease the offer of Latin to Key Stage 3. I know from personal testimony of parents and students that the offer of Latin was perceived to raise the status of the school.

Where schools wish to introduce Latin, my experiences would lead me to particularly recommend the following:

(1) Have several teachers, rather than one person, who are able and willing to deliver the subject content.
(2) Plan for subsidising small classes as students progress from Key Stage 3 to 4.
(3) Develop outreach links with feeder primary schools.

Epilogue

On the back of my timetabled classes, I have added 'Latin teacher' to my CV and gained private tutoring work which saw me taking a student through to GCSE Latin (he got an A!). Latin lives on in my school as a small breaktime group which incorporates both staff and students; I am guiding them through reading Ørberg's *Familia Latina*. I currently have no further aspirations to reintroduce Latin to the timetable.

Notes

1 Curcin and Black (2019) suggest that a grade 7 at GCSE is equivalent to A2 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages, which is the second level on a six-level scale. Only a grade 9 at GCSE just about crosses over to CEFR grade B1, the third of the six levels.
2 A discussion of the amount of vocabulary required for the current AQA French GCSE can be found in the 'Let's Transform MFL' blog post: https://transformmfl.wordpress.com/2018/07/15/keep-up-the-pace-learning-vocab-in-gcse-mfl (accessed 12 June 2022).
3 See the report in The Guardian, for example: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/jan/14/plan-pupils-learn-1700-words-language-gcse-go-ahead (accessed 12 June 2022).

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