TPRS, PQA & circling

by John Bracey

Latin is no longer the exclusive dominion of the elite. The Latin language is now accessible to all types of students as a result of the shift towards the use of Comprehensible Input in the Latin classroom. Part of making Latin accessible to the many involves divorcing oneself from limiting beliefs about what constitutes content in the Latin classroom. Enter Blaine Ray and Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS).

TPRS is a Comprehensible Input-based approach that's centred around personalised questions and answers (PQA) and what's affectionately referred to as story-asking. PQA is the simple process of asking students questions about themselves and their interests in the target language. Story-asking is the process of collaborative story creation involving the teachers and their students.

According to Stephen Krashen, the progenitor of Comprehensible Input, input must be both comprehensible and compelling in order to optimise language acquisition. Focusing the content of conversation and the topics of stories around students, their ideas and their interests nearly guarantees compelling input. As much as we would love for all of our students to be mesmerised by great works of Classical authors, this isn't always going to be the case. Shifting the focus to students allows for greater

flexibility than adhering rigidly to a Classical syllabus.

Before entering into the specific details of execution, it is important to remember that all of this work is centred around Krashen's hypotheses. For these techniques to be effective, they should be used in accordance with Second Language Acquisition theory. The language used must be comprehensible and comprehended by the students in the room. The teacher must make this their goal whenever communicating with students. For these same reasons, the teacher must not use these techniques as a way of explicitly teaching grammar facts, or as a way to drill case endings. These techniques are designed to promote language acquisition and not linguistic analysis.

Personalised Questions and Answers

As mentioned before, Personalised Questions and Answers (PQA) is nothing more than a simple conversation about the students in the room. The key to this technique is to remember that the goal, as always, is to provide compelling comprehensible input. The goal should never be to force students to speak in order to drill a grammatical concept. The focus is entirely on providing input. Even

though the process is framed as a conversation, it is really the teacher who is doing all of the talking. Students are mostly providing one-word answers like 'yes' and 'no'. Again, they acquire language through interacting with the input, not by producing language themselves.

For PQA to be effective, the anxiety must be kept to an absolute minimum. As Krashen puts it:

The effective language teacher is someone who can provide input and help make it comprehensible in a low anxiety situation.
- Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition.

There a few different types of PQA that are out there, but I would like to focus on two broad categories that I'll call 'targeted' and 'non-targeted'. The procedures are essentially the same, but the setup and logistics are different enough that they warrant separate considerations. When I use the word 'targeted' I am referring to the use of pre-planned words or phrases. When I use the word 'untargeted', I am referring to the use of whatever language naturally emerges from the interaction. It is worth mentioning that grammar should not be sheltered during these conversations. Use whatever grammar is necessary to communicate naturally, while keeping the number of new words to a minimum. Always remember to shelter vocabulary and not grammar.

Here is an example of what targeted PQA may look like in a beginning Latin class:

> The teacher selects three to five words to be the topic of discussion that day. Let us assume those words are *habet, canem, amat,* and *vult.* The teacher writes those words on the board with their English equivalents. It is important that students don't have to guess what the words mean during the conversation. The teacher then begins to ask questions of their students.
>
> **Teacher:** *omnes, quis in classe canem habet?* (students who have dogs raise their hands).
>
> At this point the teacher can choose to stick with the phrase *canem habet* and ask some follow-up questions.
>
> **Teacher:** (Teacher selects individual students and then addresses the rest of the class) *omnes, Jada canem habet!*
>
> Students then demonstrate their understanding in whatever way the teacher has taught them to do so. This could something as simple as a thumbs up or a choral response of oohs and ahs.
>
> It is also important to mention that the chosen student is not directly put on the spot. Their name is used and then the statement is posed to the rest of class. This student may be addressed directly during the interaction, but this must be done with a degree of caution. A student may easily feel put-on-the-spot if they aren't extremely comfortable with the situation.
>
> **Teacher:** *omnes, Jada elephantum habet?*
>
> **Students:** *minime!*
>
> **Teacher:** *ita vero! Jada canem habet. omnes, quid est nomen cani?*
>
> At this point the students will shout out a bunch of different names. This is fine. The goal is to ask all questions to the whole class before considering asking an individual student. This ensures that every student understands the meaning of the question before being asked individually.
>
> **Teacher:** *Jada, quid est nomen cani?* (Jada provides the name of the dog and the conversation continues.)
>
> Once the teacher has got enough mileage out of *canem* and *habet*, they can now start to introduce one of the other words.
>
> **Teacher:** *omnes, quis in classe canem vult?* (Teacher repeats the same questioning process as above only now introduces comparisons.)
>
> **Teacher:** *omnes, Erik canem vult! Erik canem habet?*
>
> **Students:** *minime!*
>
> **Teacher:** *Erik canem habet an canem vult?*
>
> **Students:** *vult!*
>
> **Teacher:** *quis canem habet?*
>
> **Students:** *Jada!*
>
> The teacher now has the freedom to carry this conversation into a variety of different directions, all while remaining totally comprehensible. They can ask multiple students about their own dogs or what kinds of dogs they would like to have. They can ask the class who loves dogs and who doesn't love dogs, and let the conversation flow.
>
> By the time this conversation ends, the students will have heard each of the targeted words dozens of times in the context of a meaningful interaction. The fact that the conversation is taking place in Latin should be nothing more than an afterthought. The goal is to make the conversation so comprehensible and compelling that the students forget entirely that they are interacting in another language.

What about upper-level classes? Fortunately, PQA is applicable to all levels of proficiency. It is possible to have equally compelling conversations about more complex subject matter.

Here is an example using non-targeted PQA to introduce a story about the Greek philosopher Diogenes and Alexander the Great. In the story, Alexander offers Diogenes anything in the world that we want. What makes this PQA session non-targeted is that it isn't designed to pre-teach specific words. The purpose of this session is to introduce the students to the philosophy of Diogenes. Here is an example of how this might go.

> First, the teacher writes the driving question up on the board with its English equivalent. In this case, let's use *si usquam habitare possitis, ubi habitetis? - If you could live anywhere, where would you live?*
>
> Second, the teacher introduces the question and ensures that everyone understands. At this point, the teacher has options. The teacher can either go around the room and ask specific students, or they could pass out scraps of paper and have students write their answers, in English. If the latter is chosen, the teacher could then collect the scraps and select a few answers to discuss. This can be done, identifying the student or not. Here's how the interaction might look.
>
> **Teacher:** *omnes, aliquis in classe in Dubai habitet! quis in Dubai quoque habitet?*

Students will raise their hands if they also would choose to live in Dubai. The teacher can then follow up with questions seeking more details.

Teacher: *si in Dubai habitare possitis, in villa magnifica habitetis?*

The teacher asks the question slowly and looks around the room to check for comprehension. It is also perfectly fine to ask the question in English 'what I am asking?' Then the students who understand will answer accordingly and confusion is avoided. The teacher should then repeat the original questions.

Students: *ita vero!*

This is the most likely response, but it's okay if the answer is negative. Let the students guide the conversation.

Teacher: *si in Dubai habitare possitis, in via habitare velitis?*

Students: *minime!* (Again, this is just the most likely response.)

The teacher can then compare locations or take the conversation in a different location until the momentum subsides.

The non-targeted PQA above can easily transition into a discussion about Diogenes and how he preferred to live on the street and how he refused Alexander's offer of riches.

Whether using targeted or non-targeted PQA, the focus should remain on the students and not on the language. Even if the ultimate goal is to connect students to a particular text, the conversation should stand alone.

Story-Asking

Story-Asking is a cornerstone practice of TPRS. The process consists of creating a story in collaboration with students. The teacher asks students for suggestions about plot points and characters and the result is a unique and personalised story, which can be used as reading material.

Over the course of my years teaching at all levels, I have yet to come across a single activity that can rival the effectiveness of story-asking. This is largely because it is extremely challenging for a teacher to create or find both comprehensible and compelling reading for their students. So rather than guessing what might compel the students in your classes, the students themselves provide the compelling factor.

At first, like many language teachers, I was reluctant to try story-asking because it seemed like a lot of moving parts. Once I finally gave it a shot, I was instantly impressed at how much engagement and interest seem to skyrocket. Classes began to take pride in their stories and would frequently request to make more. The more I embraced this, the less my classes felt like a typical Latin class, and the language itself became nothing more than a means to create stories.

Much like PQA, story-asking is an intensely personalised experience. Not only do students provide the details of the story, they also have the opportunity to include themselves as characters. It never ceases to amaze me how much students enjoy stories about themselves and people they know. Developmentally, teenagers are at a time in their life when they are developing their identity and sense of self. It is only natural that they find personalised stories all that much more compelling.

I have received resistance from the Latin teachers around the globe, who balk at the idea of creating silly stories with students in Latin class. The criticisms usually centre around a perceived lack of cultural relevance or an aversion to creating new Latin that doesn't directly relate to the Classical tradition. I usually respond by pointing out that it is our job to teach students first and content second. Not all students sign up for Latin with the intent of translating works of Tacitus in a dim corner of a library. It is important that we engage in practices that will engage all types of students. Regardless of one's ultimate goals, Latin is still a language like any other. Story-asking is a great way to engage students in the language acquisition process. What they ultimately do with that language is up to them. Let's make it our goal to engage and retain all types of students in our programs first, and then worry about how to introduce them to our beloved Classics.

So how does one actually go about asking a story? Just like with PQA, story-asking can be done using targeted or non-targeted approach. The targeted version relies on preplanned vocabulary and often times a script. The non-targeted version relies on series of questions from which a story naturally arises.

If you're just getting started, I would strongly recommend starting out with using targeted stories. This is especially a good idea for Latin teachers who have limited speaking proficiency. Having a script in hand allows the teacher to focus on the skills of story-asking with the comfort of a safety net. The script could be something that a teacher writes up before class or could be something taken out of a book.

When I first started out, I relied very heavily on story script books. I would hold a script in front of me or have it sitting on my desk to reference. The students didn't seem to mind one way or another that I was working from a script. The process of creating the story was so engaging that they could care less about my awkward fumbling. The more comfortable I became with the process, the more I would allow the story to veer off script, but I would strongly recommend clinging to it in the beginning.

With all that being said, it is very important that the students feel that they have ownership of the story, which can be tricky when working with a script. The secret is to use student suggestions for the cosmetic details of the story and not the overall plot structure. For example, the teacher might ask where the story takes place or the name of the main character. These are important details, but they don't impact the structure of the story itself.

Here is a how a target story might play out in a classroom setting:

The teacher writes the targeted words and phrases on the board with their English equivalents. Let's say the teacher has chosen *donum accepit, a/ab, ei non placuit*. The story is about someone who receives a gift from someone else and doesn't like it. So, the shell of the story looks like a Mad Lib.

_____ *donum accepit. a/ab _____ donum accepit. donum ei non placuit quod donum erat* _____.

Teacher: *omnes, aliquis donum accepit. quis donum accepit?*

It is now that the teacher looks to the class to provide suggestions. There are variety of different ways to go from here. The teacher can have the students raise their hands and then select one to be the main character. Another option would be to have the students suggest already existing characters or names. It is totally up to each teacher to decide how to do this. I most often opt to select a student to be their main character, because it helps personalise the experience.

Teacher: *ahhhh! omnes, Cuinn donum accepit!*

This person then comes to the front of the class and becomes the first actor. Their job is to act out their role in the story while the teacher narrates. This person is critical to the story-asking process. They provide a powerful visual aid that will not only help to tell the story, but will also maximise engagement. Students adore watching each other perform.

Teacher: *a quo Cuinn donum accepit?* (Again, ask the students what the question means to ensure comprehension).

Students: *A moose! A giant eyeball! His arch enemy!*

The students all shout out suggestions in English. It is important to limit their responses to one, two or three words maximum. If this rule isn't established, the teacher might end up with really long and convoluted suggestions. At this point, the teacher can either choose whichever answer they find the most compelling or, as I typically do, allow the student actor to choose their preferred suggestion.

Teacher: *omnes, Cuinn donum a magno oculo accepit! Cuinn donum a Magistro Bracey accepit?*

Students: *minime!*

Teacher: *minime! Cuinn non donum a Magistro Bracey accepit. Cuinn donum a magno oculo accepit.*

The teacher can ask a few more questions of this nature but not too many. Stopping to ask too many questions during the story can disrupt the flow and cause students to disengage.

The story continues until all of the details are filled in and the story comes to a natural end. The story can be extended easily by adding multiple locations and seeking more of the same details. In the example above, the teacher could ask about another gift given by a different person, or a different student receives a gift. The result is that you turn a simple scripted story frame into a fully fleshed-out story.

Here's how a story might play out in a non-targeted or unscripted setting.

First the teacher must select a student or character to be the subject of the story. In this case we'll use a fictional character that the students created.

Teacher: *ecce! hic est Tanka. omnes, ubi est Tanka?*

Students: (Shout out suggestions.) *Australia, Wales, the sun!*

Teacher: *omnes, Tanka est in sole! quocum est Tanka in sole?*

The teacher continues to ask questions about who, what, where, when, with whom, until a story starts to emerge.

The leap from target and scripted to unscripted and non-targeted stories can be really overwhelming at first. It can be scary to operate without a script and try to maintain some semblance of control of the story. But it is important to remember that you're still setting the parameters in which the story emerges. You are still asking all of the questions and keeping the story moving. The more you do this, the more comfortable you will feel in the director's chair.

General Tips for PQA and Story-Asking

Ask real questions. The purpose of asking any question should be to find out the answer. For this reason, I would avoid asking questions to which the answer is already known. For example, the teacher finds out that a student loves to dance and thus ask the student *ubi tu saltas? placetne tibi cum amicis saltare?*. Those are examples of natural follow-up questions that you'd find in everyday conversation. When the questions start to feel mechanical the

kids will start to check out and are less likely to engage fully in future conversations.

Keep important words visible for all students to see. Write the words with their English meanings on the board, use question posters, word walls, anything you can to keep the language comprehensible to all students in the room. The acquisition will not occur if the students can't easily understand what you are trying to communicate.

Conclusion

The purpose of any practices employed in the Latin classroom should be to provide comprehensible input or to make input more compelling and accessible. The reason why I have chosen to make stories and PQA regular practices is not simply due to personal preference, but rather because they meet the aforementioned criteria. Like virtually all Latin teachers, I come from a traditional grammar and translation-based background. My first few years as a teacher, I spent teaching very traditionally. I had students memorise lists of vocabulary, memorise grammar charts, and translate large chunks of Latin into English. No matter how hard I tried to make this approach work, I still would end up with large numbers of students who either couldn't survive the class or didn't wish to continue further. At the same time, I was met with constant pressure from my colleagues to force even more grammar and even more memorisation upon my students in order to prepare them for upper levels. I watched the enrolment numbers dwindle in my program as I went harder and faster down the grammar black hole. In the end, I could not morally justify using an approach that seemed to categorically exclude a substantial number of students. I also wasn't going to be able to maintain my job security if kids were fleeing my program.

I came upon CI as I was desperately searching for ways to maintain enrolment and better prepare kids for my colleagues' classes. I attended a few conferences and workshops and suddenly I was hooked. My classes transformed from dens of inequality to communities of equals. Students who were labelled failures were suddenly rivalling their overachieving counterparts in Latin proficiency. My program then went from the verge of extinction to nearly tripling in size. The composition of my classes went from a few elite demographics to a more complete representation of my school district.

I ask stories and have conversation with my students in Latin because it works and the kids enjoy it. I stopped doing grammar-translation because it didn't work and most kids hated it. I understand that this is a big paradigm shift, but it is a necessary one. For our profession to survive, we must evaluate our programs based on enrolment, retention and representation rather than on the test scores of an elite few. Stories and PQA are a great place to start on the long road to building healthy and thriving Latin programs.

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