

TEACHING LATIN TO BEGINNERS AT UNIVERSITY

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May I begin by saying that I consider it a great honour to have been invited to this congress in the university of Lisbon, and a great pleasure to enjoy the warm hospitality of the department, which so fitly matches the quite unScottish warmth of the sun outside. I am also grateful for the opportunity to give this paper in my own language, while regretting that I know far too little Portuguese to do otherwise.

My teaching of Latin is practised at the university of St. Andrews, which though younger than the universities of Lisbon and Coimbra is the oldest in Scotland and the third oldest in the United Kingdom. Since the year 1311, the year of its foundation, it has, like any medieval university, seen Latin used for many purposes. First, no doubt, it was used for the needs of the medieval Church, now symbolized by the town's tall but ruined cathedral.

Then, in the Renaissance, it was used in the communication of various kinds of classical learning and the development of new studies. Its most famous alumnus of this period, George Buchanan, also came to Coimbra to organize and contribute to the teaching of Latin, something which he also did in St. Andrews, where it continues over four hundred years after his death. But it is a relatively new departure that I wish to

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talk about today, the teaching of Latin to those who have not studied it before they reach university. For some twenty years now we have been teaching a special one-year course for those who have previously done no Latin, or very little, or who have largely forgotten what they once acquired. This course arose not because Latin has disappeared in British schools — it has not disappeared, and is relatively strong — but because a demand clearly exists for this kind of course, which can now in fact be found in most British universities.

When I say that our two first-year courses in Latin — the one for beginners and the one for those who have studied it to an advanced level at school — each attract about 20-30 students per year, this may seem small by Portuguese standards, but it must be borne in mind that Latin is not a compulsory requirement for any student. A generation ago, it was compulsory, but now students have a wide and almost unfettered choice of subjects. Students who choose to do «Latin for beginners» do it for various reasons: to help with the study of history, especially medieval history, or with modern languages, especially French and Spanish, or with English language or literature. For the greater part of these students it has an ancillary role: they will study it for one year, and then devote their time to their other subjects. But some of them will continue with Latin, taking it as the main subject of their (four year) Honours degree.

The aims of this course are threefold: (i) to enable students to read Latin literature with the help of dictionary and commentary, (ii) to teach most elements of Latin grammar and syntax, (iii) to provide a sound knowledge of basic vocabulary. (They will acquire almost 1,000 basic Latin words, but their knowledge will be greater than that, because of their wide reading and because the coursebook that I am about to describe pays particular attention to studying the ways in which English words have been formed from Latin).

Students who successfully complete this course will learn almost as much as if they had spent three or four years at school. In general, one could say that they acquire a better knowledge of grammar, but less vocabulary, than those who take a typical British school course. Ours is, I believe, a successful course: most students comfortably reach the goals that we have set, and either pass the final examination or, by securing marks of 60% or over on their coursework, are exempted from it; and the number of those who choose it is, as explained above, quite large, though naturally smaller than the numbers who study such courses as history, economics, or French.

I would now like to speak about our methods, which means describing the textbook that we have chosen and to which we adhere closely. Latin textbooks are in one respect like automobiles: they are never perfect, and we love to criticize and compare them, yet we find it difficult to do without them. So although I have certain complaints against the book that we use, I am happy to commend its principles here. The book is entitled «Reading Latin», and consists of two volumes, of which one contains texts and the other grammar and vocabulary¹

No-one, I think, would now deny that reading Latin is the main aim of a Latin course, but there has been a lot of discussion in the UK, as elsewhere, of the importance of reading Latin at the elementary level and of the methods to be used. Many basic textbooks concentrate on grammar, or at least used to do so, but there is a growing feeling that this is not enough. But there is an opposite extreme to be avoided: that is to concentrate on fluency in reading at the expense of grammar. Courses which give students great experience in reading but little knowledge of grammar tend, in my opinion, to encourage superficiality and give students a false impression of having mastered the language when they have not. They provide a foundation of sand, not rock.

There is a further mean to be struck, in the matter of reading itself. Given the obvious difficulty of selecting suitable texts — and this applies both to classical Latin and later Latin — should one use «real» Latin, that is selections taken from ancient authors, or Latin specially devised for the needs of beginners? In a typical piece of classical Latin (or indeed late Latin, or neo-Latin) there will be things which are too difficult for beginners to understand without careful explanation, and these particular difficulties may distract them from the essentials that we are seeking to inculcate. On the other hand, artificial Latin may be too bland and unexciting. My own daughter (if I may lapse into anecdote for a moment), when in the course of her school career she was reading a common schoolbook based on easy, artificial Latin, was put off the study of Latin by the sheer triviality of the subject-matter — though now that she is a student of medicine she realizes the value of Latin vocabulary. In the St. Andrews textbook the problem is solved by using Latin from the classical period which has been carefully simplified under the eye of expert scholars. At first, students read very simple versions of Plautus: very different from the real Plautus, but recognizably Roman Comedy. Then they read various kinds of Cicero, and a little Sallust; these are

1 Peter V. Jones and Keith C. Sidwell, *Reading Latin*, (Cambridge, 1986).

simplified to some extent, but not so much as to lose the essentials of the writers' style and ideology. Finally, they read poems of Catullus in exactly their original form. Criticisms can be levelled at such a menu — for example, the Plautus is rather childish, the prose authors lose much of their rhetorical force, the vocabulary is sometimes specialized and not always central — but it provides a course of reading which has an essential cohesion, because it concentrates on the Roman Republic, but also an attractive variety in both tone and subject-matter.

While explaining the title «Reading Latin», I might add the imaginative use of snippets of Latin, whether proverbial phrases (e.g. *dimidium qui coepit habet*), apophthegms (*vitia erunt donec homines*), or mottoes used by English aristocratic families (*non gladio sed gratia*). But there is another and more important aspect of the title, one relevant to the method of the course. The writers of the book decided that the Latin texts should be read before the grammar is explained. This is not of course obligatory, and sometimes variety or continuity will dictate otherwise, but it enshrines a good pedagogical principle — that the students' curiosity should be aroused and they should be encouraged to work out for themselves, as they study the Latin, what the grammatical principles are. Grammar in a living context may be easier to assimilate than grammar served raw.

As for the actual method of reading, there are two distinctive features prevalent in our textbook, though they are not particularly rare and certainly not novel. These are «holding» and «parsing». «Holding» is essentially a technique for dealing with word-order. When I learnt Latin for the first time, at the tender age of ten, I was told always to look for the verb first: if that was not done, we were likely to be chastised immediately by our formidable teacher, who had a habit of throwing something at us, whether his book, his hat, or the board duster, like Jupiter casting his thunderbolt. The method that I myself teach is rather different: this is to read a Latin sentence word for word, following the order of the words, but to «hold» (or in other words, to remember or keep in mind) each word that is grammatically significant (especially the direct or indirect object, which cause most problems if they come early in a sentence) even if its function or meaning is not clear.

This approach of course implies that a student can recognize the various parts of a Latin sentence that are syntactically significant. Here the second process — that of «parsing» — is important. By this I mean the careful analysis of inflected words — verbs, nouns, pronouns,

adjectives, adverbs. We place a lot of emphasis on the ability to do this. Grammatical inflections must be learned for their own sake, and we test our students' facility and progress in parsing by frequent exercises, asking them to parse (out of context) words such as *aliorum*, *vidisset*, *quae*, *celerius*, and so on.

Another kind of exercise is the translation of sentences, and this must be done both ways: both Latin into English and English into Latin. Although the textbook actually treats the latter as optional, I consider it very important, because there is no better way of ensuring a thorough grasp of the language. Translating only from Latin does not always provide an adequate challenge, and there is a greater danger of getting the right answer by mere guesswork. Although most of a student's work will be geared to the assimilation of particular items of grammar, there are periodic «global» tests on the whole of the grammar and vocabulary covered up to that date. In this way we try to remedy a common failing apparent in courses based on textbooks, namely the tendency to neglect the testing and reinforcement of ground already covered when proceeding to new areas.

Finally, a few words about problems that we and our students face. There is, first of all, the sheer amount of learning, especially of vocabulary and morphology. When classes meet daily, and follow a graded course, and need to progress quickly, it is imperative that a student does not fall behind. One form of help that we (or rather my colleague Professor Harry Hine) have devised is a computer programme entitled «Latinstudy», which students may use for self-tuition and in particular the monitoring of their progress in acquiring basic knowledge. Another difficulty arises from the fact that some students, in the nature of things, are weaker than others, and it may be difficult to forge ahead to new areas of Latin if some students are lagging behind; here we usually manage to devise a special class, or at least extra tuition, for such people. This may intensify a third problem, namely the amount of staff time which must be invested in teaching. We believe in the «personal touch», but this means some 80 hours of student contact per year per teacher, over and above the time required by a wide variety of other courses. But unless the growing demands of bureaucracy and other threats make it quite impossible, we intend to maintain this: for the very good reason that, as we all know, it is highly rewarding to introduce intelligent students to a new language — and such an important and interesting language as Latin — and to its literature and associated culture.