'Not so Much Learning to Speak Latin, but Speaking to Learn it'. Action Research on the Use of Conversational, Spoken Latin in the UK Secondary School Classroom.

by James Sinclair

I undertook research into the use of conversational, spoken Latin in the UK classroom, due to my intention to answer three specific research questions. Firstly, I wanted to find out how easy it is for the contemporary Classics teacher to implement communicative approaches to the teaching of Latin. Secondly, I wished to discover what techniques the Classics teacher can adopt to implement communicative approaches to the teaching of Latin, within the framework of active, oral communication in Latin. Thirdly, I wanted to consider how positive is the attitude of students engaging with communicative approaches to the teaching of Latin. I was introduced to this area of research on my PGCE course of study at Cambridge University. Furthermore, I was especially inspired by the scholarship of Coffee (2012), King (2011), Lloyd (2016), Patrick (2015), Rasmussen (2015) and Tunberg (2011) who have written so positively about the unique ability of communicative approaches to unlock the joy of experiencing and employing the Latin language for individuals of all ages.

I conducted the research in a state-funded secondary academy of roughly 1,100 students, with a comprehensive intake: it is a single-sex school for girls in a commuter town near London. I carried out my research into communicative approaches to the teaching of Latin with a topset Year 9 Latin class, of 31 students, in February-March 2018. This teaching sequence consisted of four consecutive lessons. In my placement school, students learnt Latin almost entirely by using the *Cambridge Latin Course* (Cambridge Schools Classics Project, 1998). In these four lessons, I employed a variety of speaking tasks for students in the last 15 minutes roughly of each lesson, drawing on the stories and characters of the course book they were using, including the *Quintus de se* story in Stage 16 (CSCP, 1998, p. 67) and the model sentences of Stage 17 of the *Cambridge Latin Course* (CSCP, 1998, pp. 76-77).

To find out how easy it is for the contemporary Classics teacher to implement communicative approaches, my data consisted of my own reflections on the delivery of communicative approaches to the teaching of Latin. In order to ascertain what techniques the Classics teacher can adopt to implement these approaches, my data consisted of descriptions of the four lessons in which I implemented the approaches, including teaching resources. To consider how positive is the attitude of students engaging with communicative approaches to the teaching of Latin, my data consisted of student surveys, my own observations of my teaching, and records of students communicating in Latin. I aimed to capture the maximum amount of qualitative data for this research. I have sought to establish how my Year 9 students feel and think about the experience of using spoken, active forms of Latin.

I found the experience of active Latin immensely enlivening and creative, in the way that Coffee describes (2012, p. 269). I quickly ascertained, from my first lesson, that I needed to develop a Latin-speaking 'toolkit'- or collection of simple words and phrases- which I could readily and frequently employ in my lessons with this class. Furthermore, in order for the technique to function effectively, I had to pitch my Latin speaking directly at the level of language proficiency which my students had acquired at that point in the learning of Latin- which was Stage 15 of the *Cambridge Latin Course* (CSCP, 1998, pp. 43-58).

In my first lesson using the technique, I was pleasantly surprised by the enthusiasm and creativity displayed by quite a number of the students in the classroom. Words and phrases which I found myself frequently utilising included:

quid significat [Latin word] *in Anglice?* (what does [Latin word] mean in English?)

nunc necesse est mihi dicere in Latine/in Anglice. (Now I must speak in Latin/ in English)

gratias ago vobis (thank you, class)

I was very pleased with student engagement across all four communicative lessons, particularly when deploying pair-work in lesson

four. I got three pairs to perform their answers to the class on the Question and Answer task, as presented below:

Alexandria- dicere in Latine.

1. ubi sumus nos?
   a. nos sumus in urbe_____.
2. magnam turbam videre possum. quid accidit?
   a. est turba_____.
3. nunc templum pulchrum specto. quis hoc templum habet?
   a. hoc est templum_____.
4. ad villam perveni. quis hanc villam possidet?
   a. est villa_____.

The results of the two surveys which I carried out with the class reveal a mixed picture of student enjoyment of these classes, contrary to my personal assessment of student enjoyment at the time. Of the data set of 31 students, 19 students gave a positive score, and 12 gave a negative score. This means that a good majority of my students said that they enjoyed using the communicative approach: 61% positive versus 39% negative.

Overwhelmingly, the students said they did not enjoy it because they found speaking in Latin very difficult and unfamiliar, or they lacked confidence in their language ability in general. On the other hand, a large number of students who gave positive responses to speaking in Latin said that they felt the experience brought the language to life for them; indeed, some declared they had rarely spoken the language aloud before these lessons. The other common reason for enjoying the approach was its novelty, and the student's desire to try out a new approach. Furthermore, one student said 'I feel like I improved in Latin and I like the aspect of individuality through communication'. Other students who reacted positively to communicative approaches also acknowledged this facet of the process.

Conclusion

In the Renaissance age, Thomas More, Erasmus, and other humanist scholars communicated freely and enthusiastically across Europe through the mode of the Latin language, 500 years ago. On the basis of the data from my own teaching practice with my Year 9 Latin class, it would seem clear that, in 2018 in the UK, we are very distant indeed from that age, and that many impediments currently exist which act to inhibit the flourishing of communicative approaches to the teaching of Latin. Most significantly, the technique is seldom employed at present. Some might feel that there is little profit to be gained from resurrecting communicative approaches to the teaching of Latin, especially if it is difficult to prove that using the technique facilitates language learning.

I firmly disagree with this viewpoint. Though never essential as a method of teaching Latin - Latin has been taught successfully for at least the last 150 years without employment of the technique - I believe the potential of communicative approaches to 'foster the joy of learning and communicating' (Coffee, 2012, p. 269) is considerable; indeed, increased student engagement in Latin may well enhance student attainment in the subject. Therefore, in the future, it will be necessary to investigate further how communicative approaches might best be implemented in the contemporary classroom. It will be vital for teachers to develop resources and support networks for active Latin use; it appears that interest in new (or, rather, very old) approaches to Latin teaching is already gaining pace.

Students' experience of the Latin language could well be transformed in the process: as a medium through which, as one of the students herself articulated, 'the aspect of individuality through communication' may uniquely be enacted.

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