

High School Latin Program at Padre Pio Academy

Latin is essential to a *Catholic* classical education for at least two reasons.

First, it gives us access to most of the western tradition. Without an ability to read Latin, we are cut off from most of that tradition – even when they are translations of the works.¹ And yet, we want to come into contact with the great minds of the West (because we are going to learn the most from them) and they mostly wrote in Latin.

The second reason for Latin is simply that it is the Church's universal language and the language of our liturgical heritage. Our liturgy is a Latin liturgy. Even the English liturgy that many attend is fundamentally a Latin mass (that's why the mass must be translated into English). At the same time, people have prayed in Latin and the liturgy has been said in Latin for almost the Church's whole lifetime. During that same time period, most of the Church's doctors and saints have written in Latin and the magisterial documents are officially in Latin. So if we are trying to pass along the Catholic tradition, it is hard to see how this does not include Latin. There is much more that could be said about the worth of Latin in the Church – especially about how the loss of Latin contributes to decline in Catholic theology but suffice to say that recent Popes have lamented the gradual loss of Latin in the Church.

But how does one learn Latin?

I. The Problem/Current Situation

There is a relatively long history of studying Latin without learning it or being able to do anything with it. And in fact, this is more or less the experience of most language students with most languages.

Most of us have had the experience of attempting to learn a language (whether it was Latin or French or German, etc.) for a few years – probably in high school or college and by the end of our time studying it we basically had little facility with the language. Often modern language programs focus on studying grammar even if there is some oral component. Anecdotally, who has ever heard of people raving about their language program and how effective it was and how much they know? Usually, it takes people going to the country where the language is spoken and only then through much effort and time do they begin to get a handle on the language.

This experience which is relatively common across languages is certainly common in Latin. Latin students study a few years of grammar and are expected with a dictionary to “read” some difficult authors. This would be akin to taking a few years of English grammar and then reading Shakespeare or Chaucer. Most struggle, while a few percent of people make it through such studying and survive. It becomes a language for the elite. And there is a question even about those who supposedly succeed whether or not they have actual facility with the language. In Latin, the answer is that most of those who do survive *still* cannot read Latin.

Yet, there is nothing elite about any language since anyone is capable of learning any language. Were seminarians and priests so much smarter 60-plus years ago when they taught theology in Latin? Now many theologians can barely translate Latin, let alone read it or teach in it. When

Latin was the native language was it only the brilliant men who spoke and read Latin? Of course not, everyone knew Latin in the Roman Empire – not just the very smart people. If it does not take a great mind to learn a language, then why is there so much difficulty learning a language, especially with Latin?

In a sentence: the reason is because studying grammar *explicitly and formally* does not help build fluency (whatever else it helps with).

Our goal then at Padre Pio Academy is to develop fluency in Latin. What is fluency? Fluency is the ability to use the language with ease and with Latin we are especially focused on reading. It is for the most part an unconscious use of the language. When we speak or listen in English, we are not focusing at all on the forms of the words that we use but on the message that is being delivered.

So our program does not focus on the study of grammar but treats Latin as a language and not as some kind of code to decipher or translate. Besides the difficulty with which people generally have of learning grammar before being fluent in a language, needing to translate Latin into English is not an effective way to understand Latin let alone get through (reading is not the right word) many and long texts in Latin.ⁱⁱ

If direct instruction involving translation, grammar explanations, and drills do not help students acquire Latin, what does? What helps students gain fluency?

II. Solution – Comprehensible Input

The solution then to this problem is Comprehensible Input. Two important principles are the following:

- ❖ Students only make progress acquiring ability in ANY language, when they receive regular and constant **understandable messages** in the target language.
- ❖ **Language acquisition**, including the assimilation and understanding of grammar, **happens unconsciously**. (<https://latinbestpracticescir.wordpress.com/ci-guidelines/>)

This matches our experience: when I ask my students why it is wrong to say “him gave the gift to he,” the first thing that comes up is that it sounds wrong; and that it is exactly right. Because we are fluent English speakers, we *hear* immediately that it is wrong to say “him gave the gift to he.” And that is the point: we have simply heard it hundreds of thousands of times “he gave the gift to him” and so we know the right form for the subject of the sentence is “he” not “him.” And we do all of this without thinking of the forms at all. It takes no conscious effort to properly say “he gave the gift to him.”

The goal, then, is to give comprehensible messages in Latin in compelling ways because when it is compelling then learners are engaged and truly trying to listen for the message. It is almost essential for it to be engaging as well as comprehensible because students simply do not acquire language in a high-stress environment.

So, while some think that they are not very good at learning languages, the truth is that most do not have the opportunity to learn in ways that proportionate to or fitting for gaining fluency in a language. Granting some basic abilities to focus and listen, anyone can gain fluency in any language when the best principles of language pedagogy are followed.

ⁱ Sometimes there are errors and translators either leave things out or don't quite get the exact idea:

The first example is of a relatively recent tweet of Pope Francis. Someone pointed out that some Latin words were not translated in the English version of the tweet so what according to the Latin version said: "Life is *without doubt* a precious gift, we are *altogether* ignorant of its worth until we bestow it upon others *abundantly*." The English version left out the intensifiers saying: "Life is a precious gift, but we realize it when we give it to others." In fact the latter part is more of a paraphrase than a translation. There are far worse examples in the old translation of the Liturgy.

The second example shows how the translator did not get it quite right:

Pope Benedict XVI in *Sacramentum Caritatis* talks about international liturgies and he makes a comment in fact about Latin in these liturgies. The English translation says that "it is fitting that these liturgies be celebrated in Latin." The Latin literally says: "it is right/just that liturgies of this kind be celebrated in Latin." There is a big difference between something being fitting and something being right or just.

There are also cases where a Latin word might mean two distinct things or have different connotations that one English word cannot convey. In this case, the English is not wrong but it is limited. A translator must pick one of those meanings to express in the English.

A friend has a great story concerning this from his college experience. He went to a great books college where they have discussion classes, and the students were reading Aristotle and had been disputing what Aristotle meant by a single word. Finally, after roughly 45 minutes the Tutor having only the Greek with him, grabbed one of the student's book and checked the translation and exclaimed that the word wasn't even in the original! So they had debated for a significant amount of time about what Aristotle meant by a word he never said!

Also, the reasons *Love and Responsibility* the work of Karol Wojtyla had to be re-translated recently for, at least, a couple of reasons: (1) John Paul II used one polish word throughout the text and it was translated using numerous different English words giving the English reader the impression that these were different concepts when it was really one concept. (2) The old translation had missing sentences and even paragraphs, so this happens even with great works published by a top-notch press.

Therefore, concerning the substance of the message (1) nuances can be missed or through no fault of the translator something is left out by making a choice, and (2) errors are made in translations whether by leaving things out or by misrepresenting the Latin.

Concerning the style:

- (1) One often misses the style of the author because the languages express things differently the style is nearly impossible to translate.
- (2) This is especially true with Latin poetry as it is with any language: think of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* from Greek or Dante's *Divine Comedy* from Italian. You can get some wildly different translations depending on how much of the style of the poetry the translator is trying to imitate.

So if you want to be able to read and understand these texts well Latin is still the best way to do it.

ⁱⁱ What is wrong with translation?

If one really wants to be reading the great authors in Latin you have to be able to *read* them and not just not translate them. If one can only translate there is no way he is making it cover to cover of Vergil's *Aeneid* for example. Maybe

he will take a chapter or two in a semester to translate but he'll never actually take up the book and read it (let alone understand it and enjoy it as Latin literature). It would simply take too long and would be too painful of a process to do so. Nor will he ever pick up St. Thomas in Latin or the great doctors to read without being a devoted scholar (and even devoted scholars often don't do this because of the difficult translating).

Without fluency the great and vast works of the doctors of the west and the great literature simply cannot be read. It is far more difficult to try to "read" by translating the text: with translating one needs to hold three things in your mind 1) the Latin text, 2) the English equivalent, and 3) what the English words signify (their meaning). Whereas with normal reading we just have two things: the text in front of us and its signification (what it means). The real goal is to internalize the language so that reading Latin becomes unconscious, just as it is for us in English. As fluent readers of English rarely are we thinking about the words themselves or the grammar but we think about what the words signify.

Learning grammar for the sake of translating is a problem even for basic understanding. There is a common experience among grammar/translation learners of giving a literal translation of something and having no idea what your English sentence means! How does this happen if the student genuinely understands the grammar and has a dictionary? Well words have various meanings - sometimes equivocal meanings - and idioms that cannot be understood literally.

Idiom is a very difficult thing to understand through grammar and translation. To give an example that I heard the other day at Costco - somebody said "wow it is a zoo in here." And we all know what that means but if someone not fluent in English reads that or hears that the reaction would be astonishment. "What? I don't see any animals!" And this is common among someone trying to learn through grammar because you cannot look up idiom in a dictionary.