

Why Speak Latin?¹

by Nancy Llewellyn

There is much debate in the Latin teaching profession about the merits of living-language (i.e. oral, active) teaching methods applied to Latin. It seems to me that this ongoing debate can make little progress unless some fundamental misconceptions about spoken Latin are laid to rest.

I do not claim to speak for all who use oral Latin as a classroom tool, or for others whose names have come to be widely associated with the idea of doing so. That said, I am confident most of them would agree that speaking Latin in the classroom is not an end in itself but, rather, a uniquely effective means to the goal which has been the primary objective of all Latin teaching since the end of antiquity: reading Latin literature. To paraphrase a colleague's pithier expression, "living Latin" is ultimately not about learning to speak, it's about speaking to learn.²

Some people skeptical about - or even opposed to - the use of active Latin say they see little value in teaching students to ask for directions, to order a *caffè latte*, or in having students practice dialogues about what sport or hobbies they like. It may surprise them to learn that I agree. I don't know of a single coffee shop in the world where I could walk in, utter a well-turned "*Des mihi quaeso caffeam cum lacte*," and expect to get my order filled without a lot of delay, considerable gesticulating, and not a few smiles.

On the other hand, some people who are boosters for active Latin say that one valid goal of oral Latin exercises is to help students communicate with other Latin speakers. While I certainly agree wholeheartedly that conversing with others can be wonderfully educational and a great deal of fun, the sad fact is that there are precious few people available to talk to with any frequency.³ If, therefore, the value of oral exercises were functional - that is, if their value and legitimacy consists in that they equip students to communicate with nations full of other individuals who use the same language - then I would find it very difficult to justify their use in the Latin classroom generally.

So why use oral exercises at all? Allow me an *excursus*. Here in the United States, modern language classrooms devote many class hours every term to oral practice, although the vast majority of students will never travel to the countries where the

language they are studying is spoken. Take French as an example. Most high school students studying French will never travel to a French-speaking country, ask where to go for breakfast, order a *caffè au lait*, or talk to a native about soccer scores. I don't have any hard statistics to quote, but it seems optimistic to suppose that 15% in a given class actually will go to France (or francophone Canada) in a timely manner and use what they have learned. That's not quite 5 in 30 students. So if only 5 students are actually going to put their oral classwork to practical use, what's the point? Why do our French-teaching colleagues waste the time of the other 25, when they could be doing something much more stimulating, such as reading about a good battle, myth or other meaty piece of poetry or prose, in this case perhaps a life of Napoleon or some stories from *La Fontaine*?

The obvious answer is that, of course, that's not why they do it. Their primary goal as teachers is to give their students mastery of the language. There are some Latin teachers who think that their objectives and outcomes are different from those of modern language teachers. But I ask: Are they really? Should they be? Is not the objective of ALL language teaching mastery of the target language to the greatest extent it can be achieved given the practical constraints of the situation? Is the teaching of Latin different in this regard? I think not. But what about our outcomes as Latin teachers? In my observation our outcomes are indeed often all too different--not in a good way, alas--since most French students after 4 years can actually read French. Can we say the same of our Latin students?

Our modern language colleagues know that mastery comes when the student has internalized the language. They understand that internalizing happens through communication; through experiences that intimately, directly, and frequently involve the hearing and speaking faculties. Internalizing requires quick, immediate exchanges; communication that promotes thinking in the target language, without recourse to English. This principle is equally valid in Latin instruction, because, as we all know from personal experience as babies and young children, all human beings learn language by speaking and hearing. Reading (let alone translating!) is, by comparison, a very high-level, abstract skill. We don't even attempt anything as elementary as "Sam ran. Ann ran. Sam and Ann ran." (a line I remember from my 1st grade reader)

until we've lived through about 5 or 6 years of total-immersion English! The brain of a 13-year-old Latin One student is certainly much more developed than that of a 6-year-old first-grader, but the two can still be compared because the 13-year-old starts out well below the functional level of a 6-year old in terms of knowledge of the language.

Take the example of our French teacher: When a French teacher drills a student on a sentence such as "*S'il vous plait, je voudrais un cafe au lait*" ("I would like a cafe au lait, please") what he or she is really doing is drilling the student on the use of the conditional "*voudrais*", on correct conjugation "*JE voudrais*", on polite expression (certainly used in written as well as oral French), and on correct contraction of the preposition *A* with the masculine article (*AU lait*, not *A LE lait*). When it comes to Latin, even if we grant no value to learning a Latin word for coffee on the grounds that coffee is never mentioned in Cicero or Virgil, still, the little Latin sentence I used above, "*des mihi quaeso coffeam cum lacte*" reinforces the hortatory subjunctive used for polite command, the dative as indirect object, the accusative and ablative case forms and functions. Moreover, it connects all these elements in an associative framework that will help the student remember them, since human memory works by association. Plainly, even something as "trite and trivial" as a simple request for a cup of coffee can contain some pretty meaty grammar. How then can such exercises truly be trivial, or irrelevant to reading skills?

I have even greater difficulty understanding those Latin teachers who say they believe in--and test their students on--pronunciation and fluency for reasons unrelated to speaking. To what extent can speaking and pronunciation be unrelated? Is not pronunciation simply one element of speaking? Extemporaneous or even scripted speaking is certainly different from reading something off a page with correct pronunciation, but practice in the former cannot help but contribute to the latter.

I would be manifestly wrong if I claimed it is impossible to learn to read Latin without using oral exercises, since there are numerous proofs to the contrary out there: scholars and teachers who have a fluent and subtle appreciation for the written Latin word. All those of us who teach have known or have taught a few outstanding students who could read extremely well and yet do not speak. But for every one of these, how many others have we lost? How many talented kids have we seen quitting after only

a few weeks, or getting bored after a year or two and moving on to something they can internalize and really make their own, such as Arabic, French or Spanish? What we call the traditional method can work tolerably well for the 50% of our class which is composed of visual learners (indeed, extremely well for the top 2% of these), but what about the rest? What about the auditory and kinesthetic learners, whose primary learning modes are so rarely and scantily addressed? Correctly applied oral exercises in the Latin classroom can help these under-served students, while also offering the visual learners "cross-training", a concept whose efficacy has been amply proven in the world of professional sports.

At length (ne diutius abutar patientia vestra!) I'll conclude with a statement I heard (and I paraphrase), that Latin teachers should not try to ape modern language teaching methodology. Certainly "ape" is a sad choice of word, since it implies simple mimicry without an underlying rationale or pedagogy. After so many, many words of mine, I hope at least this much is clear: neither I nor anybody else involved in "living Latin" is in favor of "aping" anything. SALVI's aim, in particular, is to encourage Latin teachers to seek out and apply the best available language teaching methods to their work, regardless of the language for which such methods were originally conceived. We are working to help restore in our own time the methodological tradition that was the norm in Europe for centuries before us, the same tradition that produced the great classicists of the Renaissance, and which, incidentally, far antedates the translation-based approach now commonly called "traditional."

Footnotes

1. Adapted from ["[Why Speak Latin](#)"], a response by Nancy Llewellyn (Curriculum Director of SALVI) to the claim that teaching spoken Latin is a waste of time. Originally posted to LatinTeach.
2. Quote from Prof. John Rassias of Dartmouth College. I don't know if it's original to him.
3. It has been estimated that there are only some 3,000 people in the world right now who can really carry on a conversation in Latin, and it is difficult to get more than few hundred of them together at a time, even at international conventions put on by the [[Academia Latinitati Fovendae](#)] or the [[Accademia Vivarium Novum](#)].