

The Best Way to Improve Any Latin Class

by Timothy L. Griffith

There are dozens of topics to explore when considering how to improve a Latin class: textbooks, methodology, inductive vs. deductive, paradigm memorization, morphology presentation, etc. But, as important as these all are, they are really only secondary issues. The essence of good teaching is a teacher who knows and loves his subject spreading that knowledge and love to his students. A

Latin teacher who has the perfect textbook, the most medieval methodology, the most delicate balance of inductive and deductive approach, but knows little or no Latin will ultimately spread little or no Latin to his students. In his book *The Seven Laws of Teaching*, John Milton Gregory states that the first law of teaching is the most “fundamental and essential”: *The teacher must know that which he would teach*.¹ This is, of course, familiar to *Classis* readers, as it has rightly become an axiom of the ACCS teaching philosophy. Nevertheless, there is no more difficult a place to follow it than in teaching Latin. After all, the modern world has been trying hard to forget Latin for several decades now and has come close to succeeding. But just because it is difficult does not mean it can be ignored. The first and most important task of a Latin teacher is to learn Latin himself.

So what does it mean for a teacher to know Latin? This would have seemed a preposterous question for anyone who lived before the twentieth century. The

answer was obvious: knowing Latin meant to be able to read, write, and speak Latin correctly. Since that time, however, there has been a major shift in motivation for studying Latin that has confused the issue. In the old days, people studied Latin in order to learn

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Latin, the language of the educated. Today, people usually study Latin in order to learn English. With the change in motivation for studying Latin there has come a change in definition of what it is to know Latin. Today, people frequently believe that knowing Latin is to understand the parts of speech, the five declensions, the four and a half conjugations, and 1,500 basic Latin words. That is, after all, enough to enhance English, which is the point, right? Well, yes, it is enough to enhance someone's English somewhat. But would anyone claim that we have come close to the level of English enhancement that centuries past have enjoyed from studying Latin? We certainly have made some progress, but there is a good long road ahead of us.

There is no particular problem with studying Latin in order to learn English, but lowering the standard of what it is to know Latin can only undermine the effort. Only students that have successfully learned to read, write, and speak Latin will fully enjoy the other benefits of Latin study.

This is plainly the standard that Dorothy Sayers had in mind when she proposed a return to Latin in the first place. In an essay on teaching Latin she gives the following advice: “Let the readings go as fast as possible, getting on to long, sustained extracts as soon as may be, . . .

If possible, let them speak Latin in class. Let them write simple prose . . .”² A little earlier in the same essay, she laments the shortcoming of her own Latin education: “It ended, I say, there, leaving me, after close on twenty years’ teaching, unable to read a single Latin author with ease or fluency, unable to write a line of Latin without gross error, . . . And this was a thing that never ought to have happened to me, because I was born with the gift of tongues.”³ When Sayers talked of teaching Latin, she clearly meant by it the same thing that everyone before her meant: teaching students to read, write, and speak Latin grammatically. Even though reading, writing, and speaking Latin may no longer be the ultimate purpose for studying Latin, it must remain the standard of what knowing Latin is. The closer teachers and students come to meeting this standard, the better they will fulfill the purpose of enhancing their knowledge of English. A Latin teacher who will be truly effective in the classroom must learn to read, write, and (ideally) speak Latin himself.

Such a standard may seem idealistic and impossible to achieve. Well, no one ever said recovering Latin would be easy. It can, however, be done with patience and hard work. Thankfully, there

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are more resources for learning Latin available now than ever before; and a teacher that studies daily with the goal of actually learning to read, write, and speak Latin can meet that standard within a few years. If, however, a teacher has been teaching Latin for 10 years and still has no ability in using Latin himself, something is wrong. The first law of teaching has been neglected. The teacher may have neglected it and failed to educate himself. Or, if the teacher truly has had no opportunity to learn Latin, the administration has neglected its duty to create an environment in which the teacher can teach effectively. Since there are virtually no teachers who already know Latin these days, regular study of Latin should be included in a new Latin teacher's duties. An hour per day would be sufficient. If there isn't another hour available in the day, some other duties should be lightened or removed. If we are serious about recovering classical education, it should be a priority that the Latin teacher knows Latin.

Here are some suggestions for a program of study for teachers to learn Latin:

1. A teacher should make up his mind that he is going to learn Latin completely, all the grammar and as much vocabulary as possible. Every word is important even if he'll never see it or use it again. The word for "butterfly"? *Papilio*—important! The word for "flea"? *Pulex*—important!

2. If a teacher doesn't have a good handle on basic Latin grammar, he should first take a Latin class from a local university or an on-line class to get down the basics. University of Florida, Schola Tutorials, and Veritas offer

on-line classes. Once a teacher knows the basics of grammar, he should continue to reinforce his knowledge by regularly browsing a Latin grammar such as *Gildersleeve's Latin Grammar*, Allen and Greenough's *New Latin Grammar*, or *Bradley's Arnold Latin Prose Composition*.

3. A Latin teacher should do a few minutes of vocabulary study daily. John Comenius' *Orbis Pictus* is a well-organized storehouse of Latin vocabulary that is a must for every Latin teacher. He should also have a copy of *Smith's English-Latin Dictionary* in the classroom at all times and use it whenever possible. *Smith's Dictionary of Greek and Latin Antiquities* goes way beyond simple lexical definitions and explains ancient culture.

4. A Latin teacher should read Latin on a daily basis. It is important to read something that goes fairly quickly. He should begin with something easy like story-driven textbooks (e.g., *Ecce Romani*, *Oxford Latin Course*, *Cambridge Latin Course*, *Lingua Latina Per Se Illustrata*, etc.). He should try to read with comprehension but without translation. If he has to dissect a sentence in order to understand it, he should. He should then reread the passage trying to have it make sense in his head as Latin. He should then move on to easy Latin texts like *Romulus* (a medieval prose version of Aesop's Fables available online) and the Vulgate. Then he can proceed to more difficult classical Latin authors, using the Loeb Classical Library editions with facing-page English.

5. Ideally, a Latin teacher should be able to say a lot in Latin. Thankfully, there are a lot

of resources and opportunities available to Latin teachers who are interested in learning how to speak Latin. *Rosetta Stone* has just published a three-year software-based program in conversational Latin that makes it easy for teachers to get started. *Conversational Latin for Oral Proficiency* by John Traupman is a great reference book for speaking Latin and has some useful dialogues. A teacher should practice using Latin in class whenever possible. Defining words in terms of other Latin words is a good place to start.

6. Once a teacher has reached the point where he is reading basic Latin texts and has been employing Latin conversation wherever possible, he should think about starting to attend Conventicula. These are week-long conventions for Latin teachers and professors in which nobody may speak except in Latin. There are several of these every year in the U.S., but the biggest are the Conventiculum Vasingtoniense in Wenatchee, WA, and the Conventiculum Latinum in Lexington, KY. There is no better way to hone one's Latin skill than total immersion.

NOTES

1. John Milton Gregory, *The Seven Laws of Teaching*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 1998), 28.

2. Dorothy Sayers, "The Greatest Single Defect of My Own Latin Education," <http://www.memoriapress.com/articles/sayers-intropage.html>

3 Ibid., Part I.