



Bringing Ancient Languages Into a Modern Classroom: Some Reflections

by Evelien Bracke

In France, recent curriculum reforms have signalled the cull of Latin and Greek from the secondary school curriculum – a teacher who criticised the reforms was censured; his blog disappeared.¹ Belgium – because of the strength of its Catholic education long a beacon for Classical education – is witnessing schools dropping ancient languages in favour of STEM subjects at an alarming rate, driven similarly by the government agenda.² As I am writing this article, I notice an online piece on the deteriorating situation in Malta, too.³ Throughout Europe, the financial crisis is spurring on governments and schools to intensify their push for STEM subjects – hailed as an instant fix for the faltering global economy – while vilifying less immediately practical subjects. A conversation with a French colleague who was lamenting the oppressing regime made me realise how well the UK is doing in comparison with other countries in Europe. Numbers of (state) secondary schools offering Latin are increasing,⁴ and thanks to the Department for Education, primary schools can offer Latin and Greek at Key Stage 2.⁵ Of course we should not delude ourselves: the number of secondary schools offering Latin is still low, the teaching of Greek is particularly disheartening,⁶ and only about 2% of all primary schools so far have opted to teach Latin and none (to my knowledge) have chosen Greek.⁷

Nevertheless, in comparison to the rest of Europe, a government which (whatever else one may think of it) supports the teaching of Classical languages, a growing number of hubs which see all levels of education collaborating creatively, and flourishing outreach organisations which offer financial and logistical support, give the UK at least some cause for optimism.

At Swansea University, I have spent the past four years setting up (with support from the Iris Project) and developing collaborative work placement schemes with schools, through which our students team-teach Latin to Years 5/6 pupils and ancient history to Years 3/4 in South West Wales (mainly Swansea, Carmarthenshire, and the Valleys). It has not been a straightforward process, since educational and socio-political contexts in Wales differ significantly from the rest of the UK (Latin and Greek are not on the primary curriculum as they are in England),⁸ and literacy levels are generally lower which means we have to start from a very basic level.⁹ This experience has taught me a lot about the difficulties we face when introducing ancient languages at primary school level. Some of these are self-evident, others perhaps less so – discussions with coordinators of similar projects around the UK suggest we are mostly dealing with similar issues. This article offers a discussion of the challenges, from starting out to developing the successes – and coping with failures.

A preamble of prejudice

Ancient languages are dead. Useless. Too difficult. Elitist. They take up valuable time in the curriculum. They don't help you when you go abroad.

All of us deal with these and other prejudices on a regular basis, and despair because they ignore the essence: that ancient languages are beautiful, and open your eyes to the world. Yet in spite of the changing culture and the evidence which suggests that learning Latin raises aspirations and – to varying degrees – literacy,¹⁰ prejudice is the first thing we encounter when considering teaching Latin at primary school level. And so we must face it with honesty rather than argue our way out, as I myself have often done. For, much as I love ancient languages, I do not think they *are* for everyone. I do think they ought to be made *accessible* to everyone, but I actually think there is as much value in modern languages, and the impact learning any subject has on pupils more often results from the teacher than from the subject. (I hated maths all through school until my last year when I excelled because I finally had a teacher who enabled me to understand.)

And so the best attitude to take when discussing the introduction of an ancient language with a school is to be honest and acknowledge the issues. The truth of the matter is that a school will often opt for a subject because someone

in power – be it a Head or a governor – has a strong opinion. If there is a strong prejudice against Latin, I would think twice before introducing the subject in this school. One of the first schools I worked with told me specifically that they wanted us to teach Latin because their Estyn report (the Welsh equivalent of Ofsted) was due. I should have known this was a recipe for disappointment. The school changed requirements a week before we were due to start (90 Years 3/4 pupils instead of 60 Years 5/6), and treated the students not only with indifference but at times with antagonism. One of the students was berated for asking a Year 3 pupil to read a full sentence. I finally decided to pull out of the school when two students broke down saying they were unable to cope any longer – all this while the anonymous pupil feedback we always collect at the end of each term suggested that the pupils themselves were thoroughly enjoying the classes. Another school I decided to drop – again in spite of excellent pupil feedback – kept allocating us less and less time, until we ended up with 20 minute sessions, as if they wanted to have the *name* Latin present without having to commit to it. I am not blaming either school – I am fully aware of the pressures schools and teachers face, and having a subject and student-teachers imposed on you when you do not understand the value of the classes is not easy. What I have learned since is not to fight against the current (too much): if a school is unwilling to commit to the Latin teaching, it is best to move on. For if commitment is doubtful before teaching starts, imagine what it will be like when teachers are under pressure, and the school has deadlines and targets to meet.

These are isolated cases, however; more often, schools relish the opportunity to expose their pupils to Latin, and I indeed have a waiting list of schools wanting to take part. Very often a Head, governor, or teacher will have studied Latin themselves in school, and be willing to speak up for it. These are the partnerships I have now learned to cherish. Indeed, having examples of best practice with committed schools makes it easier to persuade others. Word of mouth is still the most common reason schools approach me: they heard about how great the project is from a colleague in another school.

A plethora of practicalities

Once a school is willing to commit to the ideology of Latin (whatever it chooses that to be), focus shifts to the practical challenges. Who will teach it, and is there enough funding? Does it belong in the timetable or should it be taught extracurricularly? How many sessions per term? Should it be offered to all pupils or only to the Gifted and Talented?

None of these are straightforward questions, and in every school we have worked with, the solution has been different. Much will depend on the teacher, their availability, expertise, and interests. Some schools already have teachers available who studied Latin and are eager to have a go at teaching it. There are also various training schemes – particularly by *Minimus*¹¹ – which allow non-specialists to start teaching Latin by learning alongside pupils. Funding is always scarce, but the charity Classics for All is extremely supportive of new projects and is able to provide some funding for teaching.¹² The context of my own projects has been different as students do the teaching rather than school staff. This solves the funding issue for schools in South Wales, since our project is free of charge for schools, with Swansea University covering the DBS, training and travel costs of student teachers.¹³

Part of the agreement with schools is that their usual staff remain in the classroom and take a proactive role in classes, the idea being that they would eventually start teaching Latin themselves. This has so far produced very limited success: in some schools, staff already know Latin but, while they are excited about the classes and join in, feel more comfortable with the students taking the lead in teaching it; in a few schools, teachers took the opportunity to disappear for most of the hour or sit in the corner checking emails (though these were usually the schools we dropped out, or otherwise a few emails of my own tended to improve the situation). From January 2016 onwards, we plan to have teachers and students being trained simultaneously, which will hopefully provide the teachers with a stronger context, more insight into the course, and a greater willingness to take over in due time, which will allow us to reach more

schools and ensure the sustainability of the project.

Regarding timing, most primaries in South Wales like to allocate a dedicated literacy slot to the Latin course, since it is aimed at connecting Latin with English (and Welsh to some degree). In one of the secondary schools with which we work, we were allocated an English slot one week and a French slot in the alternate week which also worked well. Lunch clubs and after-school clubs are another possibility and something is always better than nothing; but I find that – in some schools – attendance tends to dwindle as other commitments start taking up pupils' time throughout the year. I did teach a lunch club in one secondary school where 11 enthusiastic pupils stuck rigorously to the schedule each week; so it can work.

Allocating 30-odd university students to four to six schools each semester is never my favourite time of the year, but somehow it always ends up working out. Of course, the disadvantage of having students teach Latin is that they are usually unavailable outside of academic terms, and thus (taking into account the week we lose from the school half terms), we normally offer only twenty classes per school year: ten before and ten after Christmas. As classes are normally one to one-and-a-half hours long, this means there is quite a lot of time in between courses and progress is slow. But then the aim of the course is not to turn pupils into proficient Latin readers/speakers but rather to instil a positive attitude towards language learning and provide an understanding of how language works. In this we are certainly successful, and the time between courses matters less. The advantage of working with students is that they often bring a fresh perspective to the course and come up with creative ideas and resources I would never have thought of myself (although few share my enthusiasm for singing songs in class).

With regard to the type of pupils to whom Latin should be offered, schools often think Gifted and Talented (More Able and Talented is the Welsh description) will benefit the most. Indeed, in an educational system largely focused on the 'average' pupil, more able pupils might lack a challenge, and for them, a faster-paced Latin class can bring excitement. However, I am a strong advocate of offering Latin to whole classes rather than the selected few.

Selecting pupils on the basis of their ability – while there is a logic to doing so – can be thought to sustain Latin’s elitist status. Moreover, available US research (see footnote 10) suggests that less able pupils in fact benefit more from Latin teaching than Gifted and Talented. In South Wales, we often teach groups of up to 37 pupils. Because students teach in groups of between two and five, they are able to divide their attention between different groups. We often work with resources that differentiate according to abilities, and I always ask the students to take extra resources in case very fast pupils are finished before everyone else. There is, nevertheless, no one solution to the issue, and if a school is adamant on admitting only more able pupils, that is at least a start. Much depends on the aim of the project: a school which wishes to give pupils a head start on Latin learning at KS3 might well choose to teach only those who are likely to continue. However, in the South Wales context, we work in very deprived areas (called ‘Communities First’, divided according to post code)¹⁴ where levels of employment and education are low while dependence on benefits is high. Welsh is taught but, unless pupils are brought up as native speakers, many of them resist learning it adequately, and the debate about its use is never-ending.¹⁵ Many pupils in these Communities First areas receive little educational support at home in general, and literacy and numeracy levels are among the worst in Western Europe, as the PISA 2012 results have demonstrated. The National Literacy and Numeracy Framework designed by the previous Welsh Education Minister, Leighton Andrews, caused more anxiety and confusion than progress,¹⁶ and another round of extensive educational reforms is due to start soon.¹⁷ The Donaldson report on which these reforms are based is largely sound (it is practice-based and actually takes feedback into account) and promises more freedom to teachers;¹⁸ the 2 + 1 approach to language learning which has developed from it in theory sounds particularly appealing.¹⁹ Nevertheless, schools and teachers now face another few years of adaptation chaos, with changing buzz-words and targets. In the midst of all these reforms, with dramatically changing targets which affect both teachers and pupils, Latin classes can provide a focus on the

essence: an enjoyment of learning, and a forum for discussion. Since it has no formal place on the curriculum, the lack of stress facilitates learning and helps pupils cope with other subjects and indeed with issues outside school. Even pupils who initially resist – largely because of external issues which also emerge during their other subjects – eventually tend to get involved.²⁰ I am not claiming we reach all pupils, of course: there are those for whom Latin simply holds no meaning, and that is fine. All we are doing is providing them with the opportunity to be exposed to the language and culture.

Tantrums in teaching

In comparison to ideological and practical challenges, teaching itself is relatively straightforward. I have had students going to the wrong school (yes, they were given the correct address) or arriving at an empty school (not having been told there was a school trip), and classes all shaken up because a fight had taken place earlier in the day or starting late because of assemblies. Since not all students are born teachers and, even when they are, they do make mistakes and have to learn to be a teacher. It is often a matter of confidence, and I can see most develop throughout their time they spend teaching in a school. It does mean I have to monitor lesson plans and resources very carefully, as grammatical and other errors do appear. Very rarely students do not get on with each other (usually when one of them does not work as hard as the others), or there is an issue with a teacher. But these are rare occurrences and are part and parcel of becoming a teacher. No training can prepare you for that – you just have to go to a school and experience it.

Issues with pupils are rare too: most hugely enjoy the classes; there is some evidence on the impact classes have on their literacy levels²¹; and from feedback it is clear they talk to their family and friends about the classes. Grandparents particularly seem to get involved since they often studied Latin in school themselves, and intergenerational debate is often sparked. Pupils – particularly younger ones – also tend to develop a bond with the students, and are often upset when the course comes to an end.

The biggest issue is one of classroom management. Part of the agreement we have with schools is that class teachers are responsible for this aspect of the teaching, since they have daily contact with their pupils while the students are only present once a week. In reality, however, some teachers find it acceptable to leave the students in charge entirely. When I monitored four students in a particularly rowdy classroom – I would have found it impossible to learn had I been a pupil there – the teacher told me she rarely had control over the class herself. However, by the end of the course the students had managed to gain a great rapport with the pupils, so the issue *can* be managed and this is something on which I want to provide students with more guidance in future years. One other issue which I have already mentioned is the differentiation in resources – I do not think we’ve been entirely successful in delivering this, but it is something I am aiming to develop in the next semester.

Concerning course books, at primary level *Minimus* and *Telling Tales in Latin* are the most popular ones in Britain, with others (such as *Io Viroconium*) also available. However, when I first started the project in Swansea, teachers kept asking me to slow down and go back to basics because the reading level was too high for the pupils. This led me to develop our own resources to complement either *Minimus* or *Telling Tales* (the students are allowed to use whichever course book they like, or even a mix of the two), which allow pupils a slower start in which language is approached at word and phrase level before confronting sentences. A connected question concerns the teaching method. Immersion is more popular in the US than in the UK,²² and I do not expect my students to teach in this way. However, at primary school level, the Reading Method broadly adopted by the two above-named course books requires additional material beyond the texts to appeal to the younger audiences – not exactly immersion but a chance to engage with the language on an oral and auditive level rather than solely written. Hence we start from plays, stories, games, and puzzles which introduce words and phrases, sometimes in English sentences. The approach will largely be dictated by the aim of the teacher.

I would like, at this point, to add something about ancient Greek. It is also allowable in the English primary curriculum, but as I have said, no schools seem to teach it. To me – in heart and soul a Hellenist more than a Latinist – this is a real tragedy. There is a poetry and mystery to Greek, deriving perhaps partly from its different writing system, which provides access to yet a whole new world of meaning which Latin lacks. The teaching might be facilitated once new course books – such as *Mikromus* and *Telling Tales in Greek* – are published. But I anticipate that finding teachers might be more difficult: fewer will have studied it in school and MFL teachers might worry about the difficulty of the script if they have to start learning alongside the pupils. Since the Greeks are often wrongly perceived to be further removed from us than the Romans, schools might be more difficult to persuade to offer the ancient Greek language. In South Wales, I have been as yet unable to persuade any primary schools to allow us to teach it, though we will be offering it in two secondary schools from January 2016 (in itself a success, I think).²³ At any time I introduce pupils to the culture of the Greeks, however, the language inevitably comes up. At a recent workshop I gave about ancient Greek curse tablets to Years 5/6 pupils from the Valleys,²⁴ the first question after we finished our opening discussion was ‘Miss, how do we write x in Greek?’. We embarked on a discussion of the alphabet and before long, pupils were decorating their clay tablets with Greek writing. Pupils are inevitably fascinated, and I intend to keep trying to persuade primaries to offer it (by means of student-teachers).

The secret of sustainability

This is the trickiest issue of all: the teaching of Latin in a school often depends on the enthusiasm, drive, and persistence of one or more individuals. If they leave or if a new Head comes in who has no interest, Latin classes tend to evaporate into thin air. Training of groups of teachers can help overcome the issue, and highly motivated schools will of course make sure the provision is always there. In our case, the students actually provide support to the teachers, and even

though we have different students teaching in each year – because so many of our students want to become teachers – I am usually able to offer classes in consecutive years. But there is no magical formula. I love all aspects of Classics, push for it relentlessly in South Wales, and have recently set up the Cymru Wales Classics Hub (CWCH) with a group of passionate teachers.²⁵ If we want to sidestep the issue of dependence on individuals for sustainability, it is important to have a team that is willing to drive development. Pushing at a higher level – to the government, local councils, or school federations rather than to individual schools – can also provide more sustainability. Ultimately, though, it is again important to be flexible, to give way when opposition is too strong, and to develop where the project clearly ‘flows’. I think Horace would have agreed.

Between triumph and tragedy

So what have we learned about introducing ancient languages in primary schools? Perhaps that the most difficult challenges relate to context rather than content. That, once teaching actually takes place, benefits to pupils derive not only from the linguistic and the cultural aspects which broaden their worldview and raise their aspirations, but also from the (at least in Wales) stress-free learning environment. And that there might be a need for hubs to get together more to create a stronger support mechanism that can provide leverage in communication with governments, councils, and school governors.

To end, I would like to share with you the greatest triumph and tragedy of the past four years. The worst tragedy would have to be the OCR Entry Level Latin we allowed Year 6 pupils from a local primary school to sit three years ago. What started as excitement turned into catastrophe as the school took months to decide when and where they wanted the pupils to take the exam. By the time the exam came around, pupils had not had Latin for two months, and one girl broke down in tears. So much for the stress-free learning environment! I have since decided to ignore formal recognition: pupils receive a certificate from us at the end of each year, which seems to satisfy them. Very able

pupils are told of the OCR Entry Level exam, but none have asked to sit it. With the emphasis on language enjoyment, we rarely move beyond the imperfect and future tenses of verbs and first and second declension of nouns and adjectives by the end of Year 6. But getting pupils to enjoy discussing verb endings and acting out Latin plays is an end in itself.

The greatest triumph I witnessed while monitoring a class taught by one of my students who had created his own game on the Roman senate.²⁶ I must admit I still do not entirely understand what the rules are, but the pupils were wholly engrossed – it was like a computer game brought to life, I suppose. Each year I start by teaching the students, but by the end of their teaching experience, they always surprise me by pushing creative boundaries which allow pupils to become immersed in the world of the Romans and of language. This particular class of about 25 pupils, busily discussing their financial contribution as senators to the emperor’s building plans and responding to him in Latin using the construction of *volo* plus infinitive, enjoyed this game as culmination of two years’ Latin tuition by our students: pupils were confident when speaking in public (mostly in very basic Latin, but – where necessary – switching momentarily to English), were not afraid of making mistakes, and clearly enjoyed the linguistic as well as the cultural content. As these pupils moved to local secondary schools which do not offer Latin (and do not want to – I asked!), there was disappointment from them as well as their parents. But that is a whole different challenge – one which we are yet to tackle appropriately.

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¹http://www.liberation.fr/societe/2014/10/28/numerique-les-profs-pries-de-ne-pas-critiquer_1131425. All websites in this article were accessed 26 August 2015.

²See an article by the Minister for Education: <http://www.bildecreevits.be/nl/scholen-bieden-vaker-techniek-aan-als-alternatief-voor-latijn>.

³<http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20150816/education/Teaching-Latin-in-the-21st-century.580869>.

⁴E.g. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/schools/latin-makes-surprising-comeback-in-state-schools-9677092.html>.

⁵[https://www.education.gov.uk/consultations/downloadableDocs/ks2_choice_of_languages_consultation_report_final_published%20\(2\).pdf](https://www.education.gov.uk/consultations/downloadableDocs/ks2_choice_of_languages_consultation_report_final_published%20(2).pdf).

⁶See the recent news about Camden School for Girls: <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/mar/11/camden-school-girls-last-non-selective-state-school-ancient-greek-considers-ditching-it>, although there appear to be a few other UK state schools teaching it.

⁷<http://cdn.cfbt.com/~media/cfbtcorporate/files/research/2015/r-language-trends-2015.pdf>, p. 121.

⁸<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-30778644>.

⁹My students and I have designed a website with resources we use in classes: www.literacythroughclassics.weebly.com

¹⁰See research in the US, particularly in the 70s and 80s, reviewed in B. Omrani, 'Teaching Latin at primary school level' (Durand Primary School, 2010): <http://www.bijanomrani.com/?p=teachingLatin>, accessed 21 February 2015; A. DeVane, 'Efficacy of Latin Studies in the Information Age' (Valdosta GA, 1997): <http://teach.valdosta.edu/whuitt/files/latin.html>, accessed 21 February 2015; R. Masciantonio, 'Tangible benefits of the study of Latin: a review of research', *Foreign Language Annals* 10 (1978), 375-82; N.A. Mavrogenes, 'The effect of elementary Latin instruction on language arts performance', *Elementary*

School Journal 77 (1977), 268-73; F. Pond, 'Influence of the study of Latin on word knowledge', *School Review* 46.8 (1938), 611-18; and C. K., 'Tests and measurements in Latin', *CW* 15.20 (1922), 153-7.

¹¹http://www.minimus-etc.co.uk/inset_page.htm.

¹²<http://www.classicsforall.org.uk/apply/>.

¹³The College of Arts and Humanities at Swansea University provides me with an annual budget, but I also do fundraising through ancient language classes run during the summer, e.g. *Ancient Languages in the Park* (<http://swnclassicalassociation.weebly.com/ancient-languages-in-the-park.html>) and the *Swansea Summer School in Ancient Languages* (<http://www.swansea.ac.uk/artsandhumanities/bc/summerschoolinancientlanguages/>).

¹⁴<http://gov.wales/topics/people-and-communities/communities/communitiesfirst/?lang=en>.

¹⁵https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/spoken-latin-a-modern-remedy-for-the-nations-age-old-reading-problems/2014/07/31/20269f54-0792-11e4-a0dd-f2b22a257353_story.html.

¹⁶<http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/progress-literacy-numeracy-framework-slower-8434360>. See <http://learning.gov.wales/resources/browse-all/nlnf/?lang=en> for the NLNF programme.

¹⁷<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-33388356>.

¹⁸<http://gov.wales/topics/educationandskills/schoolshome/curriculumwales/reform/successful-futures/?lang=en>.

¹⁹This was established by the current Welsh Education Minister, Huw Lewis: 2 native languages (English and Welsh) + 1 foreign language.

²⁰A wonderful blog post by one of my students on a breakthrough with one of her pupils can be found here: <http://literacythroughclassics.weebly.com/blog/acting-out-the-senate?>

²¹More information soon.

²²https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/spoken-latin-a-modern-remedy-for-the-nations-age-old-reading-problems/2014/07/31/20269f54-0792-11e4-a0dd-f2b22a257353_story.html.

²³I have created a PowerPoint presentation with information about teaching ancient Greek for those who are interested: <http://litresources.weebly.com/primary-greek-ages-9-12.html>.

²⁴<https://storify.com/nimuevelien/technologies-of-daily-life-in-ancient-greece-559aef57b572c28d0ebdcaa6>.

²⁵CWCH, the Cymru Wales Classics Hub, will support the teaching and learning of Classics at all levels in Wales: <http://cymruwalesclassicshub.weebly.com/>.

²⁶Here is the lesson plan: <http://litresources.weebly.com/lesson-36.html>.