



Structuring CI-based practices for success

by John P. Piazza

While many Latin teachers are successfully implementing Comprehensible Input-based practices¹ in their classrooms, plenty of teachers are hesitant to do so - and for good reason. One need only follow the discussions on the various blogs and Facebook groups dedicated to CI-based practices to see a predictable arc that goes from enthusiastic implementation to giving up and falling back on previous practices. Teachers who are attracted to CI-based practices are often those who also are frustrated with the traditional textbooks and curricula, and so a change in methods is often accompanied by a loosening of a traditional unit structure, or even the daily and weekly structure of a traditional language classroom. To do this, however, is to confuse the content of classroom instruction with the practices that contain them, the latter being an important element of classroom management.

The purpose of this article is to encourage teachers to retain clear daily, weekly and unit structures in order that any changes they make will be lasting. I also want to offer a corrective to the notion that CI-based strategies are inherently unstructured and require the abandonment of classroom routines. These assumptions have prevented teachers from taking CI-based strategies seriously and have also created obstacles to further implementation. It is my hope that teachers will take steps to implement CI-based practices *within* the successful

frameworks that they have already established. I will also offer a few specific structures that will support these new practices but are not necessary for making more CI happen in the classroom.

Novelty results from content, not just routines or activities

It is important to acknowledge that students need *both* engaging, novel experiences *and* predictable routines. It does not have to be an either/or situation. This provides a foundation of trust in which students and teachers can feel free to get away from the more predictable (and less engaging) content of traditional curricula, while still accomplishing the day-to-day learning objectives, assessments, and other obligations. In addition, a clear classroom management structure serves to remind students that the less conventional activities based on CI are serious parts of class, and that they (the students) will be held accountable for participating and learning during this time, *even if it doesn't feel like traditional learning*. Teachers who focus on CI-based practices are often the victims of their own success, in that students don't always perceive how much language they are in fact acquiring. For this reason, it is also important to include written work on a regular basis, even if the focus is on delivering spoken messages. Whether it is a writing activity,

illustration of a reading with captions, writing and acting out of a script, or even a vocabulary quiz, framing the activities with tangible pencil-on-paper tasks will give students, parents, and administrators tangible evidence of progress and accountability, which will in turn contribute to a perception of 'rigour' that will benefit a program.

A sample weekly and daily schedule

Regardless of one's method, it is helpful to have a weekly routine where certain things (more or less) happen on a given day. Here I offer a sample weekly schedule based on my own classes², which provides a framework of predictability for students, and reduces the number of decisions that a teacher has to make on any given day. Each step also consists of routines that the students are familiar with (unless I am introducing something for the first time). So even if I am switching out what reading activity I do (e.g. partner translation, movie talk, choral reading, drawing, etc.), it is more like moving puzzle pieces around than creating something from scratch. I would recommend making a list of all your go-to activities, and have that easily accessible so you can simply pick one without having to go through multiple steps. For compilations of these activities, see the resources at the end of the article.

Monday:

1. ‘What did you do this weekend?’ written and then spoken activity
2. Greeting and calendar
3. Song of the Week, intro and rehearsal.
4. Continue with activities from last week and/or introduce new reading (if time remains, but steps 1-3 could take the entire period).
5. Write and Discuss

Tuesday:

1. Silent reading 10 min + 4 minutes for reading log entry.
2. Greeting and calendar/weather
3. Song, practice
4. CI/Reading activities
5. Write and Discuss
6. Time to review for tomorrow’s quiz (using Quizlet) (if test) vocabulary review activity

Wednesday:

1. Students begin class by reviewing for Quiz/test (if test, then limit following steps)
2. Greeting and calendar/weather
3. Quiz/Test
4. Warmup using NLE questions or Latin phrases in English use
5. CI/Reading activities

Thursday:

1. Silent reading 10 min + 4 min for reading log entry

2. Greeting and calendar/weather
3. Song
4. Grammar Talk or spot check translation
5. Reading activities and/or Quick write

Friday:

1. Warmup using NLE questions or Latin phrases in English use
2. Greeting
3. Song (performance)
4. CI/Reading activities
5. Roman storytime / game time / check-in with individual students

Daily Lesson Structure

Focusing in on the daily level, I have found it helpful to ‘bracket’ the activities with calming predictable practices which reinforce /confirm/ make explicit the ‘learning’ that took place during the lesson. Notice in the above weekly schedule, that each day follows a similar pattern:

1. Quiet warm-up writing activity
2. Class greeting, sending the message ‘we are all starting class’
3. Communicative check in/follow up (partner and/or whole class)
4. Class song (practice, discussion, or performance)
5. Segue into core activity
6. Break for a check-in, brain break, additional instructions, etc. (could happen multiple times in a period, especially during a longer block)
7. End with written activity that sums up daily work or preps for next day (Write and Discuss, Quick Quiz, Timed Write, etc.)

8. Class valdediction, sending the message ‘class is over, you may now pack up’

There will always be exceptions to this structure, especially if a particular activity is going well and I don’t want to disrupt the momentum, or if we are having a test. But even then, I will try to give tests on a regular day, (Wednesday or Friday usually) so it disrupts as few of our routines as possible.

Conclusion

Experienced teachers will hopefully recognise many familiar aspects of their own classrooms, regardless of methodology. If teachers have implemented routines that work with their students, then a transition to more CI-based practices need not disrupt those structural aspects of the class, and in return, those structures will help ensure successful implementation of new practices within that class time. Predictable structure and routine (which allow for flexibility in response to student interest and need) is typical of good teaching, and need not be argued for here. What I think requires emphasis, however, is that a transition to CI-based practices does NOT require a transition away from traditional classroom management structures and routines. The novelty and engagement then come from the teacher’s choice of content of the daily reading and discussion.

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Links and references:

My webpage containing many activities and resources for the Latin classroom. Most of what is mentioned in this article is described in details here: www.johnpiazza.net/for-latin-teachers

Keith Toda's list of CI-based reading activities. This collection is perhaps the most helpful for teachers who are interested in this transition. <http://totallycomprehensiblatin.blogspot.com/p/ci-reading-strategies.html>

Lance Piantaggini's collection of CI-based resources and materials. <https://magisterp.com/ci-materials/>

'Making Sense of Comprehensible Input in the Latin Classroom' by Robert Patrick: http://tcl.camws.org/sites/default/files/TCL%20Spring%202015%20Patrick_0.pdf

'Beginner Latin Novels, and Overview' my article published in Teaching Classical Languages <http://tcl.camws.org/sites/default/files/TCL%208.2%20Piazza.pdf>

For an extensive list of research that supports CI-based practices, see this page: <https://tprquestionsandanswers.wordpress.com/2014/10/06/the-research-supporting-comprehensible-input/>

¹'Comprehensible Input' is not a method, but a technical term used to describe an

understandable message that is conveyed in speech or writing in a target language. I will use the term 'CI-based practices' as a catch-all to describe any classroom activity that is consciously designed with the goal of delivering or aiding the delivery of meaningful spoken or written content in Latin or the target language. This is in contrast to a practice whose conscious goal is to provide or 'teach' information *about* the language through description, practice, or analysis. For specific examples of CI-based practices, see the links and references at the end of this article.

²My daily and weekly structures are based on examples offered by Ben Slavic and Tina Hargaden: see <https://www.benslavic.com/suggested-weekly-schedule.html> and the resources offered in the "CI Liftoff" FaceBook group.