



Input-Based Activities

by Lance Piantaggini

As for the benefits of moving away from grammar-translation to more comprehension-based and communicative language teaching (CCLT), few can argue they are insignificant and dismissible. In fact, the more one hears about thriving Latin programs, reduced teacher stress, increased student engagement, and inclusivity of all learners, the harder it becomes to justify pedagogical practices of the last 300 years or so (Musumeci, 1997). Still, hearing about current changes to teaching practices often leaves teachers perplexed. Where to start? Not only can navigating 40 years of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research be daunting, but teachers are often left with a lack of support and practical resources to affect any change. In many cases, even the change itself is feared.

While others have written extensively about Comprehensible Input, its theory, and relationship to Classical languages, this article offers practical input-based strategies and activities for immediate implementation. Still, the sooner a teacher can develop a Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) program, de-emphasise explicit grammar teaching and testing, encourage translating what is already understood (vs. in order to understand), adjust grading practices to de-emphasise accurate identification and production of forms, and read about the Romans in Latin (not English), the more successful and complete a comprehension-based and communicative language teaching (CCLT) program will be.

The first, perhaps most important distinction to make when moving to more comprehension-based and communicative language teaching (CCLT), is that a communicative approach does not mean planning for paired speaking activities, such as ordering lattes at a cafe. In fact, modern language teachers would also benefit from eliminating that kind of role-playing in the classroom. Once considered activities to prepare students to interact with native speakers outside of the classroom, the reality is that communication cannot be practised, or taught. Communication is now commonly defined as the interpretation, negotiation, and expression of meaning. When students interpret a level-appropriate text¹, they are communicating. When students ask the teacher to clarify meaning, they are negotiating; thus, communicating. Finally, should students ever write ideas, or share thoughts in Latin, they are communicating. Clearly, reading Latin is the more common, if not universal goal, the caveat being to distinguish the implicit process of reading from the analytical process of translating. In fact, students should be translating what they already understand, not translating in order to understand! Of course, reading understandable, level-appropriate Latin requires teachers to scale back expectations of what can realistically be read for meaning. In most cases, this means reading adapted versions of ancient texts in place of standard

unadapted ones, even those containing copious notes. For example, Luigi Miraglia's *Fabulae Syrae* can be read by most third- and fourth-year US Latin students with much more ease than Ovid's original works. Having read the former, students will be more prepared to successfully analyse and translate the latter, if that is an expectation of a particular Latin program.

Nonetheless, since reading Latin is likely the universal goal, the practices shared in this article are organised by activities using existing texts, either adapted, co-created, or unadapted, as well as activities used in order to get those texts. On my website, there is no distinction between the classic skills of listening and reading, or writing and speaking. Instead, I find it more helpful to consider practices as input-based, or output-based, respectively. In this article, however, I have decided to organise activities according to the four classic skills, knowing all too well that most Latin teachers lack communicative proficiency in the language, and might want to begin with activities that don't require much speaking on their part (i.e. some of the listening activities for students). In addition, the activities listed are among the smallest in scope out of all I have collected, as well as the easiest to begin implementing without significant training, whether through Latin immersion exposure, or more specific method-based language teaching training, such as Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS), or those offering 'CI Workshops'.

It is important to note that any activity in this article can be used at any level, either by increasing questioning levels (e.g. either/or, fill-in-blank, why?, open-ended), varying sentence lengths (e.g. more degrees of subordination, additional modifiers, etc.) or expanding vocabulary. Before these activities are presented, however, I would be remiss not to mention a bit about the practices fundamental to my teaching, making implementation all the more possible. Once again, these are not required to begin using the strategies and activities immediately, but should offer more insight into comprehension-based and communicative language teaching (CCLT).

I do not explicitly teach grammar; students are already exposed to a lot of grammar in my classes without drawing any attention to it. Grammar is always found in context, like all language and communication. The most convincing reasons for not teaching grammar are studies showing how the effects of grammar instruction drop after a few months, and begin to disappear after eight. These studies basically show how most teachers are wasting their time with grammar, even if it appears to be effective in the moment, or over one's career. But we do not need studies to show this. Instead, consider how the beginning of the year or unit 'review' reflects that students do not actually know the content—they only knew it enough to pass a previous course, unit, etc. Furthermore, even when I do address grammar on the rare occasion that a student notices and asks about the language, it is brief (i.e. 'pop-up' grammar), and I still do not test or grade that knowledge. In fact, I would sooner teach grammar explicitly than I would grade it².

I do not use textbooks. Aside from a focus on explicit grammar, textbooks overload students with vocabulary in a way that lowers confidence for all but those with the best memory. Textbook chapters typically have at least 20 different words used just once or twice in a text passage. Very few of these new words recur. As a result, students are exposed to a lot of meanings, yet only a few grammatical structures at a time according to the chapter grammar focus. This has not been shown to aid comprehension—the *sine qua non* of

language acquisition—and inhibits the student from creating mental representation of the language. Instead, I shelter (i.e. limit) vocabulary, recycle the words often, and unleash grammatical structures as needed. Thus, students are exposed to a wide net of language without the cognitive demand of new meanings, and build mental representation more effectively. This was a major reason for writing texts that beginning students understand with ease. In fact, my curriculum is as flexible as possible, and never stale. The Universal Language Curriculum (ULC) combines features from various successful curricula I have implemented, and observed. It was designed to be the most student-centred, collaboration-ready, SLA-aligned, and school-friendly representation of what to actually teach in the classroom. Search for the ULC on www.magisterp.com.

I do as little grading as possible. Grading does not cause learning, or acquisition, so why spend time on it? Instead, I score student work. Scoring shows progress without affecting a student's course grade. To do this, I create a grading category with 0% weight, and use it as a digital portfolio of anything done in class. Sometimes the score is a completion/collection check, other times it is based on a score out of four (for consistency, though you could do the same out of 100). That evidence is then used to give a course grade. In terms of a course grade, students self-assess just once per grading term using a rubric. The rubric I have come to use is entitled Input Expectations, and based on how much comprehensible input students receive, which is a result of following Daily Engagement Agreements (D.E.A.). The rationale is simple; students who receive input that they understand (CI) will—WILL—acquire the language. D.E.A. are my classroom rules (i.e. Look, Listen, Ask). I have graded these in the past, but found that there is less to deal with when they are posted just as rules. They are the main factors contributing to how much input students receive, which is now what students are graded on entirely in my classes.

I do not spend any time whatsoever creating assessments. Like grading, testing does not cause learning, or acquisition, so my time is better spent otherwise. Instead, my assessments are authentic, and in real

time. When a teacher recognises that a student does not understand, they have made an assessment. The adjustment is making the language more comprehensible. The response is providing more input. Anything else is unnecessary. In fact, the response is always providing more input, so analysis might lead to the teacher thinking they need an explicit lesson to improve a perceived deficiency (which we know the effects of disappear). For maintaining expectations of teaching language in school, however, I use short, no-prep quizzes that are input-based (see Quick Quizzes below), we score them as a class (i.e. immediate feedback), I record/report them in the 0% digital portfolio, and then use them as evidence to determine the course grade, just once. This is a well-oiled machine that runs itself so the focus of class is on input and interaction.

I do not test speaking and writing. Speaking and writing are forms of output, a result of input. Since listening and reading causes speaking and writing, there is no need to focus on the latter. Also, there is no need to speak or write Latin, so let us stop there. While modern language teachers might feel pressure to get students speaking (often mistaking the ends with the means), there is no logical rationale for Latin. Instead, I use any student writing as one more step away from becoming more input (after editing, typing and sharing with the class), and I expect no verbal responses in the target language. One or two word responses are encouraged, but even a response in English shows comprehension. Still, students do begin speaking Latin, eventually. This shows me that all I need to do is provide opportunities for students to speak, and anything that comes of it is welcomed. If students do not speak, I will be providing input no matter what, anyways. This is interaction, which sometimes is misunderstood as paired speaking activities, yet interaction can be non-verbal. As such, if I were to teach a modern language, I would have the exact same outlook; expect no output, but welcome it when the time comes for students to produce it naturally.

Without further ado, here are the activities, beginning with reading. Reading activities include Free Voluntary Reading (FVR), Draw-Write-Pass, and Silent True/False Reading.

Free Voluntary Reading (FVR)

Students choose a book and read for X minutes. This is credited to Stephen Krashen. FVR is Krashen's term for Extensive Reading, which has been researched by many, as seen in the meta-analysis assembled by Jeon and Day (2016). The importance of an FVR program cannot be understated. After all, reading is paramount. Perhaps the best aspect of FVR is that not only are there no instructions, but there is also no prep. The only thing needed for FVR is a selection of reading material. The recent explosion of Latin novellas certainly helps provide reading options for the beginning student (*disclaimer: I have written 12*), but booklets of co-created class stories, and illustrated storyboards from class are more than enough to begin an FVR program. Start with what your students can handle. Some teachers do FVR for the first ten minutes of every class. Others do FVR for five minutes twice a week. The only guidelines are that the teacher should also be reading during FVR; it is not a time to catch up on emails, or report scores in the gradebook. Sometimes FVR is followed by a discussion of who read what, and which books students would like to recommend to their peers. I model reading for my students, calmly looking up from my book if they appear off-task, and always make it a point to share with them what I am reading in Latin. *What makes this CI? When students read texts they understand, they are receiving comprehensible input.*

Draw-Write-Pass

Using blank storyboards with lines or a space below empty boxes, students read the text, choose a sentence, draw it, then pass. Then, students look at the drawing and read the text to find the sentence the other person drew, write the Latin in the lines or a space below the box, choose another sentence, draw it, then pass. Continue. *What makes this CI? When students read a text they understand, they are receiving comprehensible input.*

Silent True/False Reading

In pairs, students read silently for X minutes, then each draws two drawings about the text; one true, and one false.

Students swap papers, and each partner points to the true drawing. Pairs then trade papers with another pair, and determine the new true drawings with their partner. Continue passing papers around the room and identifying the true drawings. Follow up with Picture Talk (see below). *What makes this CI? When students read a text they understand, they are receiving comprehensible input.*

There is one reading and listening activity: Read & Discuss/Sustained Silent Reading (SSR).

Read & Discuss/Sustained Silent Reading (SSR)

Students read, and then the teacher leads a class discussion on the topic, in Latin. This discussion could range from asking comprehension questions about the content to asking more personalised ones about how students feel about the content. The latter are known as Personalised Questions & Answers (PQA), used to connect the text content to students' lives, as well as compare those in the room. While a discussion in Latin might appear daunting for those with low proficiency, even asking just one question for every message read *doubles* the input! These questions could be simple yes/no and either/or, without much beyond what is in the text. During the discussion, restating student responses, especially if they are in English, provides additional input. The only thing that distinguishes this from FVR is that students are all given the same text. I either begin, or end, every text-based activity with SSR! It is good for students to get a feel for their own reading ability without the support of peers. This also gives a bit more purpose to any activity afterwards. *What makes this CI? When students read a text they understand, they are receiving comprehensible input. When they listen to the teacher asking questions, and making statements that they understand, they are receiving comprehensible input.*

Listening activities include Listen & Draw Whiteboards, Listen & Draw, Classic Dictation, Storyboard Dictation, and Flyswatter PictureTalk.

Listen & Draw Whiteboards

The teacher says aloud a simple phrase, or very short sentence that students draw on

dry-erase whiteboards. Students then hold up their whiteboards so the teacher can check comprehension. This is particularly helpful at the beginning of the first year as students begin acquiring the language. For more advanced students, longer and more detailed messages could be used. *What makes this CI? When students listen to phrases and sentences they understand, they are receiving comprehensible input.*

Listen & Draw

Students listen to a longer text, and draw what they hear. This could be done by the teacher telling an entire story once through, or shorter texts repeated a few times. Use a blank storyboard to depict events, or a single paper representing the entire story as a collage. One benefit to Listen & Draw is that the teacher need not possess a high level of proficiency—something our profession historically lacks—rather, can just read a text aloud. Students might only be able to draw parts of what they hear, especially for longer stories. Consider a follow-up activity during which the teacher repeats a sentence from the beginning, then asks who drew that part. If any student has, use a document camera to treat the student drawing like a Picture Talk (see activities for getting texts below). *What makes this CI? When students listen to a story they understand, they are receiving comprehensible input.*

Classic Dictation

The teacher reads aloud one sentence a few times as students write down *exactly what they hear*, in Latin. The teacher then projects the text as students use different colour pens to make changes to what they heard (vs. what the text has). Check comprehension by asking questions, or translating (see Choral Translation). This activity, while pacifying, is probably the least compelling of all. I have replaced this with Storyboard Dictation (see below). *What makes this CI? Dictation itself is not necessarily CI—anyone can listen to a different language and attempt to represent sounds with letters. Students would need to process the language in order to receive comprehensible input, which could be achieved by interacting more with the text (e.g. teacher asks comprehension questions once the sentence is projected, or the teacher leads a Choral Translation).*

Storyboard Dictation

This is like Classic Dictation, except students also draw what the Latin is about (use storyboard templates with lines/space underneath each box). This gives fast processors who quickly write the sentence something to do while slower classmates might need to hear the sentence twice before representing it as a drawing. Continue the Dictation process as outlined above, with projecting and using colored pens to mark any changes. As a follow-up, compile this student work into a stapled booklet for use in the Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) library. *What makes this CI? There are two opportunities for students to receive comprehensible input; listening to the sentence they understand, or reading and understanding what they transcribed.*

Flyswatter Picturetalk

Place two student drawings (e.g. products of Listen & Draw, or Silent True/False Reading, mentioned above) side-by-side under a document camera. Two competing students head to the whiteboard as the teacher describes one of the drawings. Students indicate the picture being described by calling out 'left/right' in Latin. The other students can act as judges to determine who identifies the correct picture first. Ask students to explain (in English) their choice. It is best when you can describe things that are in both pictures, reserving any difference that would reveal the correct picture being described for after some input is provided. As such, the Silent True/False Reading drawings that already have two drawings work best. *What makes this CI? When students listen to the pictures being described and understand the Latin, they are receiving comprehensible input.*

Translating activities include Choral Translation, Read & Translate, Silent Volleyball Translation, mendāx!, Individual Spot Check Translation, Trashketball Translation, and The Septem Game!

Choral Translation

The teacher points to a projected text as students translate aloud into English.

Many teachers find this activity grounding. It is an opportunity to establish meaning, as well as check for comprehension (e.g. when the class hesitates to translate, that is a sure sign of incomprehension). However, this can easily be used *ad nauseam*. It is best used to instill confidence early on in the first year, or when clarity is needed on a particularly long sentence. In addition to establishing meaning, or checking comprehension, this is often more of a confirmation of understanding. However, Choral Translation is usually boring, so I keep it to a minimum for best results. When I have a longer text, I prefer *mendāx!* to Choral Translation (see below). *What makes this CI? With comprehension-based and communicative language teaching (CCLT), translation is an activity reserved for when students understand a text already. As such, students will have received comprehensible input having previously read the text they understand. Still, if a lot of meaning was established during Choral Translation, students did not receive comprehensible input. Therefore, it is good practice to have students reread a text that was just translated for a minute or so in order to receive comprehensible input.*

Read & Translate

In pairs, students read and translate a text together on one piece of paper to hand in. While this might seem like nothing new under the sun, the difference in comprehension-based and communicative language teaching (CCLT) is notable. Read & Translate is not to be used if students are unable to understand the text in Latin. That is, students should be translating what they already understand, not translating in order to understand. This does, however, expose translation as an activity having no communicative purpose on its own. Nonetheless, this is one of my calm Friday routines to end a week full of input. Read & Translate should persist as an excellent option for when the teacher, or the students, need a break from input and interaction. *What makes this CI? With comprehension-based and communicative language teaching (CCLT), translation is an activity reserved for when students understand a text already. As such, students will have received comprehensible input having previously read the text they understand.*

Silent Volleyball Translation

In pairs, students read a text sentence-by-sentence. Student A translates aloud while Student B reads silently. Student B translates the next sentence aloud while Student A reads silently. Reading and translating continue back and forth. Follow up immediately with Trashketball Translation (see below) to give more purpose to all the translating. *What makes this CI? When the student silently reading understands the text, they are receiving comprehensible input.*

Mendax!

The teacher projects a text. Then, a student volunteer comes up to the board and points to words in a logical order as teacher translates. When the teacher intentionally makes mistakes, students yell *mendāx!*. Unlike some translation activities, students are focused on meaning in a different way during this process, and there is an element of chance that many find compelling. Everyone wants the opportunity to call out the teacher making a mistake, right? *What makes this CI? When students read a text they understand, they are receiving comprehensible input.*

Individual Spot Check Translation

Project a short text, or section of a longer text (e.g. ten lines). Students translate the first X lines into English, roughly half, and for which you set a timer (e.g. five lines of the ten, and timer for five minutes). Students continue translating beyond the first X lines if they have time, which is an important step for the faster processors. Pass out red pens and 'correct' as a class, answering any questions, just like Quick Quizzes (see below). *What makes this CI? With comprehension-based and communicative language teaching (CCLT), translation is an activity reserved for when students understand a text already. As such, students will have received comprehensible input having previously read the text they understand.*

Trashketball Translation

Setup: Students get into teams (e.g. two, three, or four depending on class size),

choose a team name, and gesture (that they all will have to do together). Gameplay: Teacher says a phrase/sentence twice, then a student is randomly selected (e.g. draw names from a hat). That student's team stands up, says team name, does gesture *at the same time* and all translate together. Understandable translation gets a point. At three points, the team gets three throws (or one per student) of a foam ball into a trash can, or box. Highest points wins. *Cave!* This game could result in low levels of input, especially when done towards the beginning of the year at the phrase-level. For more input, consider using sentence-level messages. *What makes this CI? With comprehension-based and communicative language teaching (CCLT), translation is an activity reserved for when students understand a text already. When students listen to phrases and sentences which they understand, they are receiving comprehensible input.*

The Septem Game!

In groups of three to four, students get a copy of a text, as well as a ten-sided die and one pencil. They take turns rolling until someone gets a seven, yells out *septem* and begins translating sentences from the text. They continue to do so while other team members keep rolling. Once someone else rolls a seven, they grab the pencil from the student who was writing, and takes over translating, even in mid-sentence! Play continues. The first group to finish wins. Alternatively, give points for understood sentences, not perfectly accurate, and highest points wins. I like doing the first round with all students competing as a group, translating on one paper. For the second round, students get their own paper to translate on and compete individually. During the second round, there is still just one pencil! Also, students can translate ANY sentence, and do not have to go in order of the story. This results in more story coverage, and personalisation, likely resulting in higher confidence. *What makes this CI? With comprehension-based and communicative language teaching (CCLT), translation is an activity reserved for when students understand a text already. As such, students will have received comprehensible input having previously read the text they understand.*

There is one speaking activity: Blind retell.

Blind Retell

In pairs, Student A faces board, and Student B stands with back to the board. Student B retells the story from memory (in English or in Latin). Student A, who can read the story, can assist Student B whenever they become stuck and ask for help. Students switch roles, and repeat. A blind retell is used with a known story, but perhaps better to do after some time has passed. In fact, multiple interactions with the same text could merely result in memorising the English meaning, and not actually processing any Latin. While over time this could result in acquisition, it is likely to produce language-like behaviour that fades. This, perhaps, best explains how academically successful students later on have low proficiency in the target language. *What makes this CI? Speaking is output, not input. This is a reading activity for Student A whenever they read along as Student B retells aloud. When Student A understands what they are reading, they are receiving comprehensible input.*

As for getting texts, strategies and activities include Parallel Reading, Write & Discuss, Timed Writes, Picture Talk, and MovieTalk.

Parallel Reading

Do not be fooled by what appears to be the simplest way to get a text, namely, adapting an ancient one. Indeed, it is the most obvious, and highest-leverage practice for making Latin more comprehensible for your students. However, this requires a bit of skill, and definitely some time. The first step towards adapting ancient texts, however, is beginning to write Latin that is much smaller in scope. Parallel Readings are a great stepping stone. Teachers rewrite a comprehensible text, changing details, yet maintaining most of the same structure and verbs. For example, instead of a rich mythical monster that wants food, getting it from a boy who wants money, a parallel story could be about a dragon with wings that wants food, getting it from a girl who wants to fly. These slight changes to details can result in wildly different images and stories without requiring extremely different vocabulary (i.e. 'has', 'wants', 'food', etc. are shared by each, but the stories feel very different). *What makes this*

CI? When students understand what they read, they are receiving comprehensible input.

Write & Discuss

Towards the end of class, the teacher discusses what happened that day, asking students questions and making statements, and writes/types out projected text (e.g. overhead, document camera, Google doc, etc.) as students copy into notebooks. This is a very simple way to get a short comprehensible text that students have access to immediately. It is the cornerstone to many other input-based activities. *What makes this CI? Writing is output, not input. During the discussion, however, when students listen to the teacher asking questions, and making statements that they understand, students are receiving comprehensible input. When students read what they copied and understand, they will receive comprehensible input.*

Timed Writes

Any written output is just one step away from becoming input. Edit, type up student writing, then use in an input-based activity. Timed writes instantly get the teacher as many more understandable texts as they have students. That amounts to quite a bit of Latin just a few edits away from being presentable to peers. In addition, these texts tend to be highly compelling because of the student-centred content. *What makes this CI? Writing is output, not input. When students understand the texts they will have read once timed writes are typed and shared, however, they will receive comprehensible input.*

Picture Talk

There are various 'talk' strategies that amount to discussing something in Latin that the teacher then types up afterwards. Write & Discuss (see above) would eliminate the need to remember class events, but with time and practice, the teacher can type up a short text with relative ease even hours after class ended. As for Picture Talk, the teacher projects an image, then asks questions and makes statements. Any image could be discussed at any level. Just use language appropriate

to the particular class. For example, a beginning Latin class in the second week could understand very simple statements and questions using only a handful of words. The same image could be used at the highest level with more complex language. *What makes this CI? During the discussion, when students listen to the teacher asking questions, and making statements that they understand, students are receiving comprehensible input. Once a description of the image is typed and shared, students will receive comprehensible input when they understand what they read.*

Movietalk

Of all the ‘talks’, MovieTalk is the most compelling. The teacher plays a video, often a short animated clip without dialogue, pausing to narrate and ask questions. MovieTalk is a method created by Dr. Ashley Hastings. When used with the intention that students will master particular vocabulary, Hastings has asked that people refer to the activity as something else (e.g. Watch & Discuss, Video Talk, Clip Chat, etc.). *What makes this CI? During the discussion, when students listen to the teacher asking questions, and making*

statements that they understand, students are receiving comprehensible input. Once the story, or a parallel reading (see above) is typed and shared, students will receive comprehensible input when they understand what they read.

Additional input-based strategies and activities beyond the aforementioned more manageable ones are constantly being updated on my website (www.magisterp.com). Visit the site for the latest and greatest ways to make Latin more comprehensible to students.

**Lance Piantaggini, Springfield
Honors Academy (Massachusetts,
USA),
lance.piantaggini@gmail.com**

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¹CI is input that is understood, and its relation to acquisition is “i + 1.” Those are not the same thing, and we should avoid using the “i + 1” concept to justify giving learners reading that is *above* an appropriate level, that is, a level at which the learner can derive meaning with ease, without translation (Piantaggini, 2018).

²In full disclosure, however, I did publish *Magister P’s Pop-Up Grammar* for students curious about common features of Latin, as well as for those heading into a more traditional grammar-translation program, or teacher within the same program.