This case study describes some of the strategies a secondary school teacher employs using PowerPoint presentations to enable Latin literature to be accessible to her mixed-ability pupils in the classroom. Liz Scott teaches Latin in a state maintained comprehensive school on a short timetable. Latin is started in Year 9 and Scott prepares her students for the national examinations at the end of Year 11, entering her students for the Welsh Joint Examinations C (WJEC) Level 2 certificates in both Latin Language and also in Latin Literature. She follows the Cambridge Latin Course (CLC) and reaches the end of Book 2 before she starts her students on the set texts. Scott is therefore teaching the set texts concurrently with CLC Books 3 and 4 in Year 10. Although her students have not previously studied the full range of linguistic features presented in the set texts, Scott does not consider this a problem. Instead she only chooses to draw attention to individual features of grammar when she feels it is necessary to aid the students in their understanding of the meaning of the narrative.

There are two interesting points to be made in this short case study. The first point is the way in which Scott carefully contextualises the set text in its historical and socio-cultural background. The second is the sheer number of different ways in which she mediates the text by splitting it up into units of narrative to help her students navigate the text.

1) Context

Few teachers, I suspect, would go straight into a personal study of the Latin text without having some kind of preparation: they’d use teacher’s notes, a commentary, perhaps, check out some details on the internet or from a dictionary or encyclopaedia. They would have perhaps many years of experience of reading Latin, even of Tacitus as a particular author, and this might give them sufficient familiarity with the text to be able to draw out the key themes and individual facts. Certainly they would know something about the political and social situation about which the action of the narrative was concerned. Often, however, teachers are faced with texts which are relatively unfamiliar to them, especially in schools where the Latin is being taught by newly-qualified teachers or non-specialists, and, in any case, where a new anthology of texts is specified by examinations. Traditional preparation for teaching such texts relies heavily on the use of commentaries. But increasingly teachers are also making use of the huge range of materials to be found on the internet – not so much to help them understand the text itself but to find materials which engage and motivate their students in the study of the original text. There is, however, a vast amount of material available on the internet and it can be very time-consuming for teachers to locate suitable resources. To help such teachers easily locate information about the WJEC set texts the Cambridge Schools Classics Project website contains a series of website links which support teachers as well as students in preparing the assessment materials. Scott uses the materials offered and exploits the potential of digital presentational programmes to engage, motivate and help her students to learn.

Setting the scene – visualising Nero and Agrippina

Scott starts with a slide of the imperial family tree (Figure 1), drawing details from the CLC web links. She gets the students to explore the family relationships, drawing particular attention to the marriages of Claudius, his own children and stepson. This activity is in itself useful in checking understanding of how to interpret the conventions of the layout of a family tree – often something of a challenge in the case of the Julio-Claudians! It also draws out the competing claims of Britannicus and Nero to succeed Claudius and the significance of the family connections of Agrippina which make her “emperor-maker”.

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Scot attaches a YouTube URL to the PowerPoint slide: it connects directly to a scene from the BBC drama ‘I, Claudius’. This particular clip shows the scene where Agrippina administers a supposedly poisoned mushroom to her husband Claudius at a banquet: a memorable presentation of the quasi-historical details of how Agrippina finished off her elderly husband in order to facilitate the succession of her own son Nero. In addition, the visual images themselves are an incredibly rich source of information and help to remind students of the luxury of the imperial palace lifestyle, and in addition provide some brief details about the imperial family. Perhaps it is difficult for students to get much more than a fleeting acquaintance with the individual members by name – nor do they need to know much beyond the name ‘Agrippina’ - but the size and nature of the familia (consisting of the imperial family, freedmen, and slaves and so on) can be readily appreciated. A rough comprehension of all of this can be checked and corrected, if necessary, with a brief discussion after the showing of the video clip. This might focus on the following points:

- The evil nature of Agrippina, when she feeds her own husband on the poisoned mushroom.
- Claudius’ seeming acceptance of his own death.
- The witnessing of these events by other members of the familia and, in particular, the freedmen and their apparent inaction.

Scott thinks it is worth mentioning these background features at this point. This is partly because she wants to develop the students’ tacit understanding of the cultural milieu in which the characters were operating. More importantly she knows she is going to refer back to the banquet scene when the students read Agrippina’s reported outburst at the end of the set text: ‘Let him kill me, so long as he becomes emperor!’ Agrippina’s final words, taken with the first visual images the students will have had of her, should have sufficient emotional ‘bite’ to provide plenty of material for a potentially thought-provoking reappraisal of the whole historical episode.

Two more slides bring out the issues of the accession of Nero: his early dependency on Agrippina and then his slow rejection of her meddling in his public and personal life. Scott has made minimal changes to the material which is available on the website links – she has often merely cut and pasted what is freely available – but the changes she has made are designed specifically to facilitate discussion with her students. Figure 2 shows how she has shortened the text, placed it in individual text boxes, coloured the text boxes to differentiate them from each other, included an image, and animated the text boxes so that they present information sequentially. Figure 3 shows how she has copied a single image onto a single slide in order to focus classroom discussion and allow space for the annotation of the image.
So far Scott has used a great deal of visual evidence in preparation for a reading of the original Latin. Such preparation is essential for students at this stage in their studies where plunging straight into the original, unaltered text would be very challenging. Although the students may not be able to identify every single member of the imperial family, yet they may well be able to have a good sense of the struggle which ended with the death of Claudius, Agrippina's part in it and the debt Nero owed to his mother for his imperial position as emperor.

2) Mediating the text

Scott breaks up the text into smaller sections in order to help students navigate it more easily. The discussion which follows explores her methods in more detail.

Subdivision of complex senten:

The opening of the set text passage concerns Nero's thoughts as he considers which of various ways he might be able to secure the death of his mother without himself being implicated:

igitur Nero vitare secretos matris congressus: abscedentem eam in bovo aut in agrum landare quod ultum aperet. postremo praegrevem eam esse ratus interfici constituit, hactenus consultans utrum veneno an ferro veri qualia vi. placuit primo veneno. sed inter epulas principis si daretur, referri as casum non poterat tal iam Britannici exitio. (Tacitus, Annals XIV)

Although the passage is not long, it contains, in typically terse style, several important elements, each of which must be understood, and which contribute to the drawing of Nero's complex personality. Scott again makes use of the visual affordances of PowerPoint. She takes the Latin sentence which expresses Nero's thought process and divides it into its constituent set of ideas. Next she pastes them in a 'halo' surrounding a cut-and-pasted image of Nero's head. Finally she numbers the sequence of thoughts (see Figure 4). This visual representation of Nero's innermost thoughts 'buzzing around his head' helps the students to see the constituent parts of the sentence, the sequence of thoughts, and, at each step, they are able to consider the impact of each of the suggestions on Nero's own mind: the decision-making process. This is just as much as the original text does, of course, but the more visual representation is more effective at enabling the students not only to understand Nero's thoughts, but also to appreciate Tacitus' choice of vocabulary and the precise sequencing of the sentences.

Once modelled by the teacher, this technique is an effective way to teach students to analyse further sentences of Tacitus, where it is appropriate, for themselves. It is anticipated that alert students will start to move beyond merely translating the text – 'getting through it' – to thinking more deeply about how Tacitus expresses himself.

Translation of a particularly difficult sentence is assisted by the numbering of the words and by the addition of a number of words of vocabulary (both by the meanings of the words themselves being written in above and by the underlining of a particular word).

A series of alternative translations of a particular phrase is presented to encourage students to look closely at the original Latin.

A final question is set to elicit a personal student response.

Figure 4

1.) Praegravem
2.) Interficere Constituit
3.) Veneno
4.) Ferro
5.) qua alia yi
6.) placuit primo veneno
7.) referri non ad casum
8.) tali iam Britannici exitio

Affordances of PowerPoint

Scott uses several other affordances of PowerPoint to present the original Latin text, as figures 5 and 6 show (the authors have drawn attention to a mere two out of 10 slides for presentation here). Briefly these consist of the following:

Figure 5:

• The text is overlaid on image and ensures that the setting of the story remains uppermost in the students' minds.

• Bold text and a text box draw attention to the key narrative elements of this part of the text: the role of the freedman Anicetus.

Figure 6:

• Key words are highlighted in yellow to draw attention to the key narrative elements of this part of the text: the plot to blame the weather for the 'accident at sea'.

The key element of Scott's approach is the relentless, active focus on the Latin: students cannot help but focus on the words on the slide. Some teachers like to use workbooks for their students to prepare texts in advance of the discussion – preparation taking place at home or in a previous lesson. This seems to me to be a way of diminishing the importance of discussing Tacitus' writing itself: it implies that discussion of the narrative can only take place after a translation has been achieved and perhaps safely written down. In Scott's case, the reading of the text is much more active: translation and discussion take place together, and the teacher and students are much more co-constructors of their own learning. The rich blend of video clips, photo stills, manipulated and annotated text serves very well not just to help students navigate and understand the text, but affords plenty of opportunity for discussion and reflection on the subject matter – far beyond, I suspect, than the requirements of the examination itself.
Obstulit ingenium Anicetus libertus, classi apud Misenum praefectus et pueritiae Neronis educator ac mutuis odiis Agrippinae invisus.

Look carefully at the words in bold. They all describe Anicetus. What do they tell us about him?

libertus
praefectus (classi)
educator (Neronis)
invisus (mutuis odiis Agrippinae)

Look carefully at the words in bold. They all describe Anicetus. What do they tell us about him?

libertus
praefectus (classi)
educator (Neronis)
invisus (mutuis odiis Agrippinae)

Which translation do you prefer for ‘quod venti et fluctus deliquerent’?

(a) What the winds and waves had done wrong
(b) What had been the fault of the winds and waves
(c) Something which had been caused by the winds and waves
(d) Something for which the winds and waves were responsible

Do you prefer an alternative translation of your own?

1 I am aware that some schools do not have access to YouTube via the school internet. Your school computer officer may be able to find ways to access or record the video segment for you. Alternatively, “I, Claudius” is available as a DVD from the BBC online shop and from other reputable sources.