I believe that any project you embark on in life should involve an element of fun. And so, when I had the initial idea, almost two years ago, of our Swansea University students going out to local primary schools to teach Latin, it was because I thought it would involve both students and pupils learning while having fun. Almost two years later, with the project having expanded rapidly from one local school to seven, eight to twenty students, and 65 to 330 pupils, I can honestly reflect that, most of the time, fun has indeed been the key pedagogic ingredient. There have been moments of frustration, exhaustion, and disappointment, and these will no doubt develop alongside the project. Yet I have also witnessed my students merging into dedicated teachers and getting jobs based on their work experience, pupils preparing excitedly for the OCR Entry level Latin exam, and a community which, until recently, had mainly looked upon Latin as a pointless and ‘posh’ language, engaging with it from the youngest to the oldest generations. This article will elaborate on the context of this project, and particularly focus on its methodology, which integrates MFL approaches at primary level.

**Context: Literacy in Wales**

The project I coordinate is part of the Iris Project’s *Literacy through Latin* scheme. The scheme introduces Latin at primary level with the aim of increasing pupils’ literacy levels in English, particularly in deprived areas where children might not otherwise get the opportunity to engage with the ancient cultures and languages. Teaching literacy through Latin is nothing new: in 1924, the American Classical League already mentioned an “increased ability to read, speak and write English” among the objectives of learning Latin (Kitchell, 1998). Yet teachers have long perceived a tension between this aim of learning Latin, and another key aim, namely understanding of the ancient societies (Stray, 2003). I will not enter into this debate: I believe both aims are intertwined to such a degree that it is hard to teach one without the other. However, depending on the context, one aspect might be highlighted more than the other. The present context in Wales is a particular one, and as not everyone might be familiar with it, I will clarify it briefly.

Literacy is an issue flagged up regularly by the media in recent years, but the matter seems more pressing in Wales than in the rest of the UK. In spite of the Welsh Government’s efforts to improve the situation, literacy levels are among the worst in Western Europe. In the 2009 PISA report, Wales scored 38th out of 63 participating countries for reading levels among 15-year olds (England scored 26th). In 2012, the Estyn report established that 40% of pupils in Wales start secondary school with reading skills below their actual age; 20% of pupils are functionally illiterate (BBC, 2012). Moreover, last year’s publication of national GCSE results revealed that the educational gap between Wales and the rest of the UK at the end of secondary school is widening. The impact of low literacy skills on the future of the Welsh economy cannot be underestimated: with many areas in Wales already designated as Communities First (i.e. vulnerable, deprived areas in which many people are dependent on benefits and education levels are low), decreasing levels of literacy are bound to make matters worse.

In response, the Welsh Government has set up a National Literacy and Numeracy Framework, with the aim of repairing and improving the situation. Teaching unions have raised concerns, however, about additional pressure on teachers’ workload and lack of training, and, in spite of the £7,000,000 support package attached to the Framework, practical guidelines are yet to be published. Following the recent resignation of the Education Minister Leighton Andrews, Wales is now waiting to see how his successor Huw Lewis will interpret the Framework. The results of the PISA report 2012, to be published later this year, are bound to make an impact.
The situation I have sketched is not an optimistic one, and I am not about to say that Latin teaching is going to turn it around. However, I do believe that this is a context in which we can make a difference, because of the issues. I have decided to see the problem as a challenge, and anything we can do as significant. The (previous) Welsh Education Minister’s School Curriculum Team and HEFCW have made it clear that they have no interest in engaging with the ancient languages; it is therefore up to universities, schools, and communities in Wales to take the lead. There have been plenty of studies that demonstrate the positive impact Latin teaching can have on children’s cognitive development and literacy skills. I have not yet had the time to start measuring the impact of our own project on the pupils’ literacy levels (I intend to start this in the next school year). There has, however, already been positive feedback from teachers about pupils referring to Latin when learning new grammar in English and Welsh, and consulting the Latin dictionary we have provided in the classroom. It is clear, then, that there is an impact, even if not yet measurable, and indeed pupil and teacher feedback is immensely positive.

**Project details**

When the project started, I intended on following the format suggested by the Iris Project – however, I quickly realised I had to adapt certain aspects to the local context. Here is a brief overview of how the project works.

Latin students from Swansea University deliver the actual classes to groups of up to forty year 5 and 6 pupils, but I also allow non-Latin students and A-level students from local schools to take part in the project as teaching assistants. (The side-effect of this is that they inevitably come out of the project with some knowledge of Latin!) All participants are DBS-checked, and I have put in place training by the South West Wales Reaching Wider Partnership (a HEFCW-funded Widening Access organisation which teaches students correct behaviour in a classroom environment). Swansea Metropolitan University (see below), and the Iris Project. Volunteers teach one hour sessions every two weeks; I have also created a module which students can take to formalise their work placement experience – these students have to teach one hour every week and are assessed on their lesson plans, class delivery, and portfolio. Regarding the approach, we follow the Iris Project in developing classes closely linked with the Key Stage 2 (KS2) curriculum, focusing on oracy (speaking and listening), reading, and writing. However, in order to meet the needs of schools in Wales, we have also had to develop further resources targeting literacy.

**Methodology**

Latin pedagogy has been developing alongside the rest of the school curriculum: recent psychological and linguistic theories are being integrated, and there is an increased focus on the learner with his/her specific needs and on ICT. However, when discussing teaching methods with teachers, it is clear that most teachers still rely on the grammar-translation or reading approach, and indeed most course books on the market can be placed somewhere on the sliding scale between the two extremes. Both approaches have their ardent advocates, and in teaching circles, tempers can rise rapidly when the question regarding the ‘best’ approach is raised. I will not enter into the debate here: I have used both methods myself, and believe both can be successful at secondary and HE level. For primary level, there are few Latin course books on the British market: *Minimus* (Bell & Forte, 1999) and *Telling Tales in Latin* (Robinson, 2013) are the obvious ones. Both are reading-based, and focus on aspects of Roman culture while introducing some grammar; both emphasise culture as well as literacy, have online elements, and are clearly popular among pupils and successful in their aims. If the aim is (particularly as English primary schools will be encouraged to teach Latin or Greek from September 2014 onward) to make Latin available to pupils regardless of their cognitive abilities or social background, the grammar-translation approach does not appear to suitable at primary level – so the reading approach certainly is appropriate as a starting point.

In order to satisfy the specific needs of schools in Wales, however (as they are keen to show the government they are engaging with the literacy agenda), I have had to bring the literacy element to the forefront of the teaching. Elements of ancient culture are introduced in classes as well, of course: we work alongside schools’ semester-based ‘themes’, such as myth (very convenient!), war, and family. But I have also looked towards Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) approaches to primary language learning for inspiration on literacy development. I was lucky to collaborate with Lynne Meiring, senior lecturer in Education (MFL) at Swansea Metropolitan University, who was very keen on the project. There are many aspects to the MFL approach that we are integrating, but for the moment, I will focus on two specific examples: pre-reading and triple literacy. These combine elements from the various approaches in line with the integrative MFL approach currently favoured.

There is an ongoing tension between classical and modern languages, but teaching approaches from either side have also impacted and influenced the other positively. At primary level, MFL still favours the integrative approach, using colour-coding, Total Physical Response (Abbott, 1998), and a combination of acting out, games, puzzles, and arts and crafts to engage pupils in learning; any creative teacher will be able to integrate these in their Latin classes too. For Latin teaching, as most current UK course books favour the reading approach which immediately introduces pupils to sentences and texts (Gay, 2003), pre-reading exercises need to be devised in order for the pupils to...
feel confident to approach the text. Pre-reading is nothing new (Deagon, 2006; Morrel, 2006). At primary level, however, specific exercises that tie in with KS2 principles of oracy, reading, and writing can help pupils engage with any text: exercises have been devised to move pupils progressively towards a text, from passive understanding to active use, and from oracy (the main focus of the KS2 curriculum in Wales) to writing. The following exercise has been largely designed by CILT Cymru, the National Centre for Languages Wales 11 for use with short texts, and I do not take credit for its design. The exercise is aimed at beginners, and presumes pupils to sit in small groups. The order of exercises is as follows:

1) Oracy/reading:
   a. The text is divided into sentences, and these are randomly distributed among pupils. Pupils listen to a recording of the text and raise their hand holding their text or context. This is a basic listening and reading exercise, which primarily focuses attention on passive and individual understanding of pronunciation.
   b. The second time the recording is played, pupils arrange the text in the right order within their group. This is a more developed, team-based, listening and reading exercise, which draws attention to sequence, yet pupils do not need to be aware of the meaning of the text or context.
   c. Pupils listen to the recording again and are asked comprehension questions. What is happening (Conversation? Monologue? Any background noises?)? Do you recognise any words and are they repeated; can you guess the meaning of the words; can you differentiate between nouns and verbs (and other word categories they might have seen in other languages)? The comprehension questions show pupils how much of the text they already know without reading it in detail. In order to consolidate pupils’ understanding of vocabulary, Total Physical Response exercises and other traditional games (e.g. ‘Simon dicit’ 12) can be introduced.
   d. The teacher picks up the trickiest point of the text (for example, a new piece of grammar). Games where a few pupils leave the room and have to be guided to an object/person by the volume of their peers’ voices (they can all shout or whisper a Latin word) provides an initial speaking exercise which allows shyer pupils to take part within the group. Getting pupils to ask their peers questions (in Latin, of course) when they come back into the room in order to find an object or person, can again help consolidate the oracy aspect, and now move from listening to speaking individually. 13

2) Writing:
   a. Most pupils should now be ready to do some writing. They again listen to the recording and now fill in he gaps in a version of the text, perhaps with the words to be filled in listed separately. The second time, more and trickier words may be left out, and now without a separate list of terms. Both exercises help pupils gain confidence in writing in Latin gradually. At KS2, repetition is vital, so I normally focus on leaving out words that are repeated a number of times, particularly the first time.
   b. Now, translation of the entire text can be attempted using traditional methods.

As I have said, these exercises and approaches are nothing new in themselves, but as a set, they have been designed specifically to provide a gradual introduction to texts for young children, allowing them to gain confidence quickly in a language that is not their mother tongue. Aspects of the KS2 curriculum are used at all stages, and they are enjoyed greatly by pupils in the various groups my students teach. Elements may of course be added or left out, but this is a good starting point for children in the KS2 curriculum to approach Latin texts.

Future

The collaboration with CILT Cymru and Swansea Metropolitan University is proving productive. For next year, the Department of Languages, Translation and Communication is joining the project to create triple language programmes combining English, Latin, and one modern language (depending on the wishes of the school). I am discussing teacher training with Routes into Languages Cymru (part of CILT Cymru), and will
start with the data analysis regarding the impact of Latin teaching on literacy levels. Our aim is to make Swansea University a local centre for literacy, providing guidance and support to schools in the area, not only with the Literacy through Latin project, but also through the Arts and Humanities College Literacy Scheme. Already, the community is becoming more aware of and engaged with languages, and the future – despite enduring pessimism, economic challenges, and persistent preconceptions – is actually looking bright.

I wish to thank the South West Wales Classical Association, the Friends of Classics, the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies, and the Strategic Insight Programme for the financial support they have provided to the project. The project would not exist without them.

I would like to thank Lorna Robinson, Mai Musié, and the 26 students who have taken part in the Literacy through Latin project at Swansea University in the last two academic years. I would not be able to maintain my enthusiasm for this ever expanding project without their unwavering support.

1 I presume, like myself, that most people reading this article will equate Latin learning with fun I always have done and therefore the association of the two concepts was a natural one.

2 PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) is a three-yearly international study.

3 Estyn is the office of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales. Estyn inspects quality and standards in education and training providers in Wales.

4 See www.learning.wales.gov.uk.

5 Some of my students are also teaching ancient Greek at secondary level. As I am concerned with teaching at primary level in this article, I am focusing only on Latin. However, Greek can of course play a similar role at primary level.


8 There are many articles on examples of all of these. For use of theories, e.g. Sebesta (1998); for focus on the learner, e.g. Abbott (1998); for use of ICT, e.g. Hunt (2008).

9 These are only two out of seven current approaches listed by Kirsch (2008).

10 I have not yet had the chance to look at materials developed primarily for the US market. For further information, see Polsky (1998).


12 ‘Simon dicit’ is equivalent to traditional ‘Simon says’ classroom vocabulary games.

13 For example, in order to practice the conjugation of esse, two pupils can try to find the ‘mouse’ in the classroom. They ask est es? to which their peers have to answer (non) sum.

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References


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MFL Approaches to Primary Latin Teaching