

# Graffiti on the walls: an action research plan on how making authentic opportunities for student composition helps Latin 1 comprehension

by Jacob Holke

With the changes made in the new US Standards for Classical Language Learning, pedagogy needs to develop to better meet the updated standards for student learning. One of the major changes is that reading Latin is no longer the sole pursuit of a high school Latin class (Standards, 2017; Natoli, 2018). The new standards recognise that students learn in diverse ways and that students need to learn about and interact with the cultures they are studying.

In the light of standards' development, I undertook a research action plan to see how a composition project could help students interact with the culture and Latin language in a meaningful way. I set out to see how using different activities would help students' understanding of language and grammar. I focused on a Latin 1 class that is made up primarily of grade 9 students. I wanted to see how students could learn Latin and Roman culture through the use of means alternative to reading and translating.

I developed a project to go along with Stage 11 in the *Cambridge Latin Course*. In this stage, students are exposed to *faveo*, *credo*, and *placet*, all of which take dative objects instead of accusative. The cultural aspect of this stage relates to elections in the ancient city of Pompeii. I wanted my students to be able to work on recognising dative endings, connecting the use of dative objects with these words, and gain a better understanding of both how Pompeian elections worked and how Latin reaches us today. To help my

students reach these goals, I developed a project in which students would create their own campaign graffiti in Latin.

I chose to have students write using Latin for three main reasons. The first was to create stronger connections with vocabulary. The second was to see if students could create a stronger sense of comprehension of endings by using them in writing. Finally, I wanted to give students a sense of ownership about Latin. At the school I teach at, Latin is not the primary language of study and many students want to compare their learning to that of other students. Students often want to know how Latin connects to their world in ways that they imagine modern languages would. I felt that a writing assignment, with strict guidelines, would help interest students and increase engagement even though the difficulty may be harder.

## Literature Review

Much of the research for teaching Latin has focused on different reading strategies. It has been noted that reading and writing are different skills and modes of communication, one being a comprehensive mode and the other an interpersonal mode, but both are language skills. According to the new standards for teaching Latin, both need to be worked on (Standards, 2017; Natoli, 2018). Natoli emphasises that reading is just one of a

variety of instructional strategies and that other methods of communication need to be explored as well.

Gruber-Miller discusses that need for including writing, as well as reading in introductory classes. Gruber-Miller asserts that 'writing connected prose shows students how discourse is structured and how to read Greek and Latin with greater understanding. Writing also offers the possibility of exploring our own ideas, feelings, thoughts, and values, and making comparisons with the ancient world' (Gruber-Miller, 2006). Students are able to create connections to the target language when writing. This is especially true if the students are creating composition of meaning and not just translating example sentences (Gruber-Miller, 2006). It is not so much that students learn better grammar or reading strategies that makes writing an important activity for students. Instead, writing is a useful task because it connects students to their target language.

Gruber-Miller's suggestions of a theoretical strategy have been implemented and documented by both Dugdale and Beneker. Dugdale (2011) found that his students benefited from composition at an early level in terms of engagement. Both found that students' grammar and skills benefited from revising their work (Dugdale, 2011; Beneker, 2006). Doing so allowed for students to focus more on grammar without it being overwhelming. By revising their work, students were less

intimidated in composition. They found that students were able to better convey meaningful ideas in their compositions when they did not focus on grammar and vocabulary at the same time.

Batchelor noted that student confidence grows from practising composition in Latin (Batchelor, 2018). Batchelor found that having students write in English and then changing the English into Latin helped make students feel more at ease with writing and helped them to feel better overall about their grammar and language skills.

The updated standards for teaching Latin call for teachers to incorporate skills other than reading and translating in the classroom. They call for activities that draw students into the background and context of the language beyond just reading Latin (Gruber-Miller, 2018). The new teaching standards look to create more authentic learning experiences for students. As Gruber-Miller (2018) explains, it is important that students reach a deeper level of knowledge as they participate in the field of Latin study.

Educators have documented the benefits of supplementing textbooks with authentic texts from antiquity. Thorne (2012) describes the benefits of having students look at manuscripts. Students enjoy seeing original Latin to see what they can understand. Viewing original Latin helps students learn to look closely at the language and assess how well they understand the language in the context of an original piece. Looking at primary sources like a manuscript can help students connect with Latin as it was used when it was a common language.

Finally, having students interact with Latin in non-reading ways has shown to help students engage more with the language overall. Despite not always being effective in teaching grammar nor being the end goal of instruction, students benefit from creating meaning in Latin by using their own words (Sinclair, 2018). Though Sinclair focuses on speaking and not writing, one of the main points of his research is that students benefit from the engagement they get with the language. Sinclair found that student interest is high when students participate in creative activities in Latin. Ultimately, higher levels of student interest in engagement leads to better understanding of reading through student participation.

## Class and Assignment

I chose to implement this assignment in a Latin I class made up of mostly grade 9 students. The class is at a private all-boys high school that draws students from diverse socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds as well as ability levels. At the school, Latin is one of several choices for foreign language study. Students in this Latin class are often more intrinsically motivated than the average student at the school. Several of the students are in advanced classes for their other subjects, but the majority of the students are not at this time.

I wanted to work with a level 1 class, since I have found that they are often the most curious and have not become locked into any one way of thinking about Latin yet. One of the more frequent questions that I receive from my students is ‘How do you say \_\_\_\_ in Latin?’. I have found that students are much more interested in using language to relate to their own world than in only reading about an ancient world. For this reason, I have found that strictly reading Latin does not satisfy the students’ desire to relate Latin back to their lives. When we focus solely on reading Latin, I have found that students become uninterested and do not feel as though they know Latin.

Though writing Latin has been reported to be seen as superfluous or overly complex (Davisson, 2000), I wanted to have my students write so that they could feel as though they were taking ownership of their language of study. Similarly, I felt that if students worked within a specific set of confines, they would be able to produce original work. In composition, I wanted to give students freedom to write what they saw fit so that they would feel as though they are writing about relevant topics of their choosing instead of translating set English sentences. Similarly, I felt that by creating their own Latin sentences, students would be better able to internalise Latin. I hoped that students would begin to think of Latin as a language rather than a one-to-one code for English.

My goal with introducing a writing project was threefold for my students. I wanted to see how it improved their ability to understand a specific kind of grammar, in this case using *faveo, credo*, and *placet* with datives. Secondly, I wanted to

give students a chance to explore an aspect of Roman culture and see written Latin from the time. By looking through inscriptions from Pompeian graffiti, I hoped to engage students by having them look at authentic texts and creating similar texts themselves. Finally, I hoped that, by writing, students would feel a connection to the language they are studying and have a chance to make connections for themselves with the language.

To measure results, I not only collected the project but also gave a grammar quiz and a reflection survey for students to complete. I felt that different methods of assessment were necessary to judge the project’s success since I was interested in viewing how the students did, interacting with the culture and with mastering grammar. I used grammar quizzes as both a diagnostic assessment before the project and a summative assessment at the end of the project. Influenced by Beneker, I used a rough draft as a formative assessment to see how students were progressing and gave feedback for them to use to rework their translations.

## Teaching Sequence

I introduced this project after students had already been introduced to reading dative objects after special verbs in Stage 11 of the *CLC*. At the point of introduction, students still struggled with recognising the dative but could usually piece together what the sentence was trying to say. Nevertheless, students often struggled with keeping the subjects and objects straight and not mixing them up. To help get students comfortable with the different endings, I provided a sheet with different declension endings from [thelatinlibrary.com](http://thelatinlibrary.com). I hoped that students would be able to identify what case a noun needed to be in and use the charts to help supply the proper ending. For vocab, I used a class set of Cassell’s English to Latin dictionaries to discourage students from using an online translator. I hoped that doing so would give me more control of student compositions and help students struggle less with vocabulary by making them use words they were more comfortable with.

For the project, students first read the cultural notes at the end of Stage 11 in

the *Cambridge Latin Course* to become acquainted with the system of elections and elected positions in Pompeii. After reading and answering basic comprehension questions, students were ready to begin the project. Students were given a review of the dative case as well as the verbs that took the dative and the declension sheet. Students were given the project and given direct instruction on several methods of prose composition. Composition methods followed Batchelor's outlined methods. I instructed students either to first write a Latin sentence using dictionary forms and then to annotate what each word's usage was to make the proper change or to write a sentence in English and then change the words to the proper Latin form. Students were then given time to create translations of their own will.

Students turned in a rough draft of at least two of their slogans before turning in the final draft. I used these slogans to go over student misconceptions and provide direct feedback. Upon receiving their rough drafts back, students were given time to make corrections and finish their final election slogans. Overall, students were given about a week from the time they first received the project to the time they turned in the project. Though students were given time to work in class, it was not a primarily in-class assignment and they did not have direct oversight as they worked.

## Results

In the completed projects, students struggled with using proper dative case endings. Students would oftentimes leave nouns either in the nominative case regardless of usage or would use the accusative case instead of the dative following *faveo*, *placet*, and *credo*. Despite their struggles, students felt as though they did a good job writing Latin when surveyed after turning in their work. Though students struggled writing with proper cases, they did a good job of using vocabulary to convey meaningful messages.

Though students struggled in creating the proper endings in the project, most students did well when they were assessed on identifying the proper endings of words. After completing their

projects, students were given a quiz requiring them to pick the form of the object that would best complete a sentence using *faveo*, *credo*, or *placet*. In this assessment, over 90% of the students were able to correctly pick the dative form of a word versus the accusative form of the word at least the majority of the time. In prior guided practice less than 60% of the students were able to properly use the dative case with these words or translate them. Though students struggled to write using proper endings, I found that they were able to correctly read the proper meanings of different endings. In this manner, I felt the project was successful.

Students did a good job of expressing ideas creatively in Latin. Many students enjoyed the process of creating graffiti like writings of Latin. Most students took time to artistically create their slogans to make them look similar to the examples of ancient graffiti that they had been shown. Beyond creative use of fonts, students incorporated new vocabulary to express ideas that the class had not yet encountered. In doing so they included meaningful ideas into their sentences. Students also made reference to the cultural background that they had learned in their slogans. Students' projects referred to elected positions and gave reasons why groups of citizens should support fictitious individuals that corresponded to historical realities in the city of Pompeii.

Students felt that they were learning from the activity. Though students did poorly on properly creating dative cases, they, almost unanimously, felt that the project helped them to understand the cultural background of Pompeii at least a little bit. (See Figure 1). Students felt that they understood the political process of the city and technical terms of elections as well as *faveo*, *credo*, and *placet's* usage.

## Conclusion

After reviewing the results, it became apparent for the need to re-teach the grammar of datives and case changes when writing Latin. The project became an important formative assessment in the unit for me to better help students grasp a grammatical concept. On the second attempt at writing, students did overwhelmingly better using proper

composition. Overall, I believe that the project was a success in helping teach students about the grammar.

To perform well in writing, more emphasis had to be put on writing. However, the project did succeed in helping students become more comfortable with the uses of grammar. Despite the struggle of students to properly write using the correct grammar, students demonstrated on other assessments the ability to properly read the grammar. I think that this showed that if reading, alone, is the goal, composition is not necessary. I found that students' difficulty in composition did not indicate a struggle in reading Latin. In fact, composing original Latin seemed to help students' reading abilities.

I found the project was successful in connecting students to the ancient world. In their reflections, students reporting feeling more comfortable and aware of the practices of Pompeian politics than they had previously. For the project, I had close to 100% turn-in rate, which is higher than previous projects for my classes. From the care students spent trying to make their own slogans resemble ancient examples, I concluded that students were mostly engaged throughout the project.

The project provided a space for students to create authentic communication in Latin. Students enjoyed language activities beyond reading. I found that students greatly enjoyed coming up with sentences of their own choosing and often tried to be as creative as possible. I think that students benefited from the engagement and it has made them more connected to the language. Students also were able to draw connections between the activity that they did and political activity of today through classroom discussion. They found similarities in the usage of public marketing. Students also noted the similarity between Pompeian appeals to groups of people and our current system of advertising for political candidates. I found that students enjoyed and benefited from a non-reading interaction with Latin.

## Reflection

From the results, I believe that introducing composition projects in a

Level I class is important. There was a positive influence on student learning in terms of engagement, creativity, reading, and connection to the culture and language. Though students did not necessarily learn how to write Latin from this project, their knowledge of grammar did increase from their work. I believe that the benefits of student engagement and interest in cultural background and Latin as a communicative language are reason enough to work in a project like this again into my curriculum.

In the future, I would make sure to spend more time working on the process of writing Latin. Overall, this was what my students struggled with. I think that with some more direct instruction on strategies as well as guided practice, my students would show more ability in writing using changes in case. After re-teaching, I found that my students comprehended the usage and were able to incorporate the usage into their own work. I believe that if I had spent more time on this originally, I would have seen even better results the first time.

I found that my project did a good job of incorporating the new Standards for Classical Language Learning. I was able to see concrete examples of student learning in relation to Pompeian culture and history. Likewise, students were able

to put themselves into an ancient mindset to create meaningful communication in Latin. Though students struggled with the grammar of writing in Latin, they did experience success in creating meaningful ideas in the target language and making Latin their own.

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