

INTEGRATING METHODS FROM FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING INTO TEACHING ANCIENT GREEK AND LATIN IN AN ITALIAN LICEO CLASSICO

Il presente articolo descrive un progetto sull'introduzione, nell'insegnamento del Greco e del Latino, di idee, metodi e tecniche che sono ampiamente usate nell'insegnamento delle lingue straniere e che sono fondate sui risultati della ricerca nel campo della Linguistica Acquisizionale e della Glottodidattica. Il progetto è una collaborazione tra studiosi di didattica del Greco e del Latino (Università di Pisa, Università di Oslo) e insegnanti di liceo e consiste in due sottoprogetti attuati al Liceo Classico di Brescia. Il primo sottoprogetto è costituito da una serie di laboratori di lettura di Latino, che si propone di introdurre e promuovere la pratica della lettura estensiva di testi in Latino. Il secondo sottoprogetto riguarda una classe sperimentale, in cui il Greco e il Latino vengono insegnati con un approccio comunicativo.

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Introduction

While Second and Third Language Acquisition (SLA/TLA) and Language Pedagogy largely inform current foreign language teaching, the incorporation of their ideas into Ancient Greek and Latin (AG&L) Language Pedagogy is still in its beginnings (Lloyd & Hunt, 2021; Aurora, 2022). The key innovation brought by SLA/TLA and Language Pedagogy is the introduction of a communicative perspective (including the oral dimension of the language and its active use), central in contemporary Language Pedagogy (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

This article describes an ongoing project at the Liceo Classico Statale Arnaldo (Brescia), realized with the collaboration and under the supervision of researchers from the University of Oslo and the University of Pisa, that seeks to implement ideas, insights, techniques and practices from SLA/TLA and Language Pedagogy in teaching AG&L in an Italian *liceo classico*.

The project is articulated in two different interventions (subprojects). The first subproject is a series of immersive Latin reading labs (i.e. conducted in Latin) organized as optional activities and thought of as a review, reinforcement and enhancement measure for the learning of Latin, independently from – and complementarity to – the teaching methods used in the students' classes during curricular hours. At their core is the combination of extensive reading – “[T]o become a good reader requires reading a lot and reading often [...] This principle, supported by a wide range of reading research, is generally referred to as exposure to print or extensive reading” (Grabe & Yamashita, 2022: 436) – and exposure to oral and communicatively embedded input (VanPatten et al., 2025: 46) in the target language (in this case Latin), as language learning strategies.

The second subproject consists in the establishment of an experimental class where students are taught AG&L with a communicative approach throughout the

standard 5-year program, with ample use in the classroom of AG&L as vehicular languages. This class-specific intervention thus focuses on reshaping curricular classroom teaching taking into account the findings of SLA/TLA and Language Pedagogy, albeit within the boundaries of national guidelines and final exam demands.

Collaboration between school and university is a key feature of both subprojects. While their implementation was preceded by a year-long preparation with online and in presence meetings on theoretical and practical matters, their realization is constantly supported and monitored, through periodical supervision meetings and more frequent collaboration on creating learning material, tests, etc.

Subproject 1: Reading Labs

Reading labs are an optional activity for all the school's students, aimed at introducing them to the practice of extensive reading of Latin (Hunt, 2022b: 88-95; 2023: 43-44) and at bringing the students closer to the text as a communicative event: the students are advised to focus on global understanding – as they do with a text in a modern language – rather than word-by-word translation. The final goal is to help students develop the pleasure of reading, in this case of Latin texts. In addition, through oral exposure to, and active use of, the target language (i.e. Latin) they have the chance to reinforce knowledge of vocabulary and grammar already encountered in curricular classwork.

In the year 2023/24 two labs were activated, one for second year-students (age: 15–16) and one for third year-students (age: 16–17), each comprising 8x60 min. sessions and having 29 and 20 participants respectively. Of 143 second year-students, 29 applied and were all accepted, although the planned number was 20; of 118 third year-students, 20 applied.



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As a general frame for the labs the following *rights of the participant* were established in advance:

- **I feel free to just listen**
- **I feel free to speak with complete sentences or single words**
- **I will not be graded**
- **I do not have to translate (my goal is understanding)**

Second year

Pugio Bruti (Pettersson & Rosengren, 2018) was selected as an appropriate text because of its controlled vocabulary (350 words), its plain syntax and, crucially, for seeming a more compelling reading than other comparable texts written by modern authors (or *novellae*, Hunt, 2022a). The classical pronunciation of Latin was adopted, since it is used in available recordings of the text.

Sessions were structured as follows:

1. Listening: the teacher read the Latin text aloud without providing the written text. In the first sessions the reading was done paragraph by paragraph. By the final sessions, once most of the vocabulary had become familiar, entire chapters were read consecutively.
2. Comprehension questions: closed and open questions in Latin, such as *Suntne vocabula vobis non nota? Quot personae in fabula sunt?* (“Are there words unknown to you?”, “How many characters are present in the story?”), were used to check the overall understanding of the text.
3. Second reading: this time, students followed the reading with the help of the written text shown on the screen.
4. Discussion of the text: simple and then increasingly detailed questions in Latin were asked to help students reconstruct the main elements of the story: plot, setting, characters. At first, the students answered with simple repetitions or quotations from the text, but gradually progressed to more complex sentences, using synonyms, periphrases, and equivalent structures. Focusing, at times, on a bit of text through *circling*¹ questions encouraged students to speak more, and, indeed, fostered collaborative learning, as students often helped each other to answer.

¹ In circling, “to provide [...] dozens of closely spaced repetitions of [...] words and sentence formats” “the teacher asks a series of questions based on a single sentence” (Bailey, 2016: 1).

5. Production: this phase included summarising, in Latin, what read so far, predicting plot developments, and acting out short scenes from the text. In all phases, corrective feedback was mostly given through recast.

Third year

For third-year students, who have gone through all Latin grammar in class, a selection from Plautus’ *Amphitruo* seemed to be a suitable original text, especially when read in a scaffolded edition (Ørberg, 2003). The ecclesiastical pronunciation of Latin was adopted, as the most familiar to teacher and students.

Sessions were divided into four parts:

1. Recap questions: questions (in Latin) were asked about the text read in the previous meeting (5’).
2. Reading: the teacher read the text aloud while students could follow the text on the screen (thus not on an individual copy). To support understanding, the teacher rephrased the text, wrote key words on the board, displayed images taken from the textbook, and used realia (25-30’).
3. Describing pictures: a comics version of the story (Vergari et al., 2023), with the text blanked out by the teacher, was shown to the students, who were asked to describe (in Latin) the pictures, who the characters were and what they were doing (10-15’).
4. Work in pairs or small groups and role play: students took on the roles of different characters and asked each other questions (in Latin). The teacher provided some words and sentences (question words, key vocabulary, synonyms, phraseology) on the board. Occasionally, students were asked to read aloud the text acting as one of the characters (10-15’).

Finally, the students put together a play selecting ca. 70 lines from the text, which they performed in Latin with Italian subtitles at the local *Nocte del Classico*, a yearly, national one night-festival held in many Italian *licei classici* to promote this type of school.

Evaluation

In addition to informal feedback gathered during the sessions, formal feedback from the students was obtained through online questionnaires.

Future developments

The experience seemed worth repeating, so in the current year (2024/25) a reading lab on Plautus' *Miles Gloriosus* is being offered to third- to fifth-year students and a lab for first- and second-year students will start in spring 2025. A more thoroughgoing strategy for having students start an extensive, individual reading path after the end of the lab is also being devised.

A critical issue remains finding a suitable time for extracurricular labs: to facilitate the participation of students living far from the school, the labs are placed at the end of the 5-hour school day. This, however, poses challenges to students' concentration and attention.

Subproject 2: Experimental Class

A class was established which is being taught AG&L with a communicative approach throughout the standard 5-year program. This comprises four Ancient Greek hours and five Latin hours per week during the first two years and three Ancient Greek hours and four Latin hours during the three final years. The class is now into its second year (students' age: 15–16) and counts, at the time of writing, 28 students.

The decision to try a communicative approach arose from the teachers' unsatisfying experience with a grammar-translation approach and its focus on the formal aspects of the language rather than on the contents of the texts, its use resulting in poor lexical knowledge and scarce abilities in extensive reading. Adopting a communicative approach, instead, has meant working on the four language skills (listening, speaking, talking and writing), not only focusing on linguistic analysis and translation, but trying to increase lexical competence and reading comprehension. This does not mean that less attention is paid to translation: it

Reading Labs		
	2nd year	3rd year
Students	29	20
Sessions	8 × 60 min.	8 × 60 min.
Pronunciation	Reconstructed	Ecclesiastical
Textbook	<i>Pugio Bruti</i>	256 selected lines from Plautus' <i>Amphitruo</i> (Ørberg's scaffolded edition)
Teachers	Anna Ruggeri, Marianna Turelli	Claudia Gafforini
Language	Latin, Italian (when needed)	
Method & Techniques	Extensive reading; listening exercises; circling & questions/answers exercises; peer-to-peer activities; group work; role plays; image descriptions.	
Assessment	No grading; feedback through recast.	
Evaluation	Student feedback: informal and through online questionnaires; Supervision sessions with all project participants.	

Table 1

Reading Labs summarized.

still maintains its importance, since it is the subject of the final exam at the Liceo Classico. In addition, fostering a more immediate understanding of the text means, in our opinion, providing a more solid foundation for translation work.

Listening and speaking

Great emphasis was placed on listening and speaking activities. From the very beginning the students were assigned AG&L names and communication in the classroom has gradually been carried over to the target language, starting from greetings and simple instructions and slowly coming to include most class activity, including parts of grammar explanation and linguistic reflection.

The use of orality in the classroom made the choice of pronunciation particularly consequential: for Latin, the reconstructed pronunciation (including vowel quantity) was chosen; 5th/4th century BCE's Attic pronunciation is used for Ancient Greek, and particularly the distinction between long and short vowels has proved to be important for reducing possible ambiguities in oral communication.

Vocabulary learning

Vocabulary acquisition is a primary goal of our teaching, so dictionary use was

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not introduced until the second year and students are expected to learn the words encountered during classroom activities (and then used in the tests). Images, videos, reference to realia, Total Physical Response (TPR) exercises – language exercises used especially with beginning learners, in which they learn by trying to understand, and respond physically to, simple commands from the teacher or fellow students (see Richards & Rodgers, 2014: 277-288) – and games have been used to facilitate comprehension and foster vocabulary acquisition.

Since much Latin audio-video material is available on the web (e.g. YouTube channels, such as *Magister Craft* or *Latinitium*), this has been used, according to difficulty level and how it matched topics in the textbook, to add new vocabulary and reinforce the known one. To increase students' exposure to the language, new texts, too, have been created and recorded. Finally, a playful and game-based approach has been chosen whenever possible, e.g. using games such as *Twister* and *Guess who* for learning colours and body parts.

While Latin vocabulary, at least in early stages, is rather easy for L1 Italian speakers to understand, Greek vocabulary required more attention. Therefore, students were asked to create a shared lexicon file, taking turns in adding new words as they encounter them in classroom work. This file has also been used as a reference for test preparation.

Reading

Reading the textbook together takes up a significant part of the lesson. This process includes asking questions, miming, explaining, and summarizing the content,

to allow broader language exposure and provide an unmediated experience of the newly introduced structures. Translation was introduced later and gradually. From the second year, more time was dedicated to it, both as homework and in class.

The textbooks used are *Lingua Latina per se illustrata* (Ørberg 2013) and *Athenaze* (Balme et al. 2013). Far from fully responding to the needs of a communicative approach, they still are the most suitable choice at the moment. Other textbooks, e.g. *Via Latina* (Aguilar & Tárrega 2023) and *Logos* (Carbonell 2023), more recent but with significantly more limited coverage of the language, provided additional material, as did adapted original texts, and texts written by the teachers using vocabulary and structures recently encountered in the textbook. During the second year, more time is being devoted to reading, comprehension, and translation of an original text to gradually bring students closer to the major goal of reading AG&L literature in the original.

To provide broader exposure to oral input, recordings of all textbook narrative, either self-produced or available online, have been played in the classroom and assigned as a listening exercise at home. As summer homework, students made their own recordings of the chapters read in class in the first year. Recordings are now a weekly homework, as the students themselves recognized their usefulness for vocabulary acquisition and language awareness.

Assessment and self-assessment

Assessment is done through comprehension, vocabulary, and morphology tests, with open-ended, multiple-choice, or true or false questions, exclusively in the target language. Translation was introduced as a test only in the second part of the first year, by which time students had consolidated an approach to texts aimed primarily at comprehension. Students are also periodically asked to self-assess their own learning (oral and written understanding and production, translation) through online questionnaires; the results help the teachers assess their progress and detect aspects on which more focus is needed.

Future developments

The results (test scores and student feedback) are encouraging, and the teachers intend to continue using a communicative approach even in the third, fourth, and fifth class, when students will deal with more complex and difficult original texts, and history of literature. It will be of great interest to observe if such an approach – favouring extensive reading skills – will continue to have a positive impact on text comprehension, thus promoting a more direct (i.e. less mediated by translation) contact with AG&L literature and culture.

Discussion

What follows is based on the teachers' observation, on formal and informal feedback from the students, on tests results, and common discussions during supervision meetings.

Motivation

In both subprojects, students have shown an increase in motivation and enthusiasm for learning AG&L. The absence of grading in the labs and, in any case, the absence of error stigmatisation – errors being simply considered part of the language learning process –, the use of peer-to-peer interaction, group work, playful and creative activities, such as role-playing and dramatization, fostered a relaxed (*“less fear of the Latin texts”* was explicitly mentioned in second-year lab feedback), enjoyable and engaging learning environment, where active participation is encouraged. In the experimental class, even students who found themselves in difficulty along the way showed great commitment to catching up and improving.

Through a communicative use of AG&L and the exposure to extensive reading practices, students have started to perceive AG&L texts as narratives rather than difficult puzzles to decipher. Students reading Plautus experienced a different approach to a Latin original text and the teacher had the chance to explore a new way of teaching Latin literature, which she has now partly introduced into her curricular classwork.

Experimental Class (curricular year 1–2)		
	Ancient Greek	Latin
Students	28	
Hours (60 min.)	4 weekly	5 weekly
Pronunciation	V-IV BCE's Attic	Reconstructed
Textbook	Athenaze	Lingua Latina Per Se Illustrata
Additional Material	Logos; Videos & Audios	Via Latina; Videos & Audios
Teachers	Ilaria Bergomi	Oriana Mignacca
Language	Ancient Greek, Italian (when needed)	Latin, Italian (when needed)
Method & Techniques	Communicative Language Teaching; TPR; circling; listening & questions/answers exercises; vocabulary manipulation; reading out loud & recording; translation; explicit grammar explanation.	
Assessment	Comprehension/vocabulary/morphology tests; open-ended/multiple-choice/true or false questions (all in the target language); translation.	
Evaluation	Student feedback: informal and through online questionnaires; supervision sessions with all project participants.	

Table 2

First two years of the experimental class summarized.

Linguistic Awareness

Self-assessment questionnaires not only helped monitor progress but also made students more aware of their own learning process, promoting active and critical participation. In the long run, thus especially in the experimental class, students have developed considerable awareness of how language works and the skill to reflect on their own learning, and actively engage in classroom discussion on language learning strategies. This further results in a constant collaboration between students and teachers, which not only nurtures a positive and engaging learning climate but also allows for more targeted and effective teaching.

Linguistic skills

The emphasis on listening, speaking, reading, and text comprehension allowed students to gain a more immediate command of grammatical structures and vocabulary.

The use of multimedia and multimodal materials (images, comics, videos, realia) and techniques such as circling and TPR facilitated the acquisition and reinforcement of linguistic structures and vocabulary.

Some students are more active and speak more, while others, especially in optional activities, such as the labs, choose to listen. This is, however, in line with expectations of different individual paces in language development, and with the

goal of helping students internalise the language through exposure to written and oral input.

Lab students, too, notwithstanding their more limited exposure to language input, explicitly mention in their feedback a perceived general improvement of comprehension skills. The lab format, supporting different levels of reading skills and various ways of participation, proved to be a suitable activity for multilevel groups, functioning, at the same time, as a review, reinforcement and enhancement activity.

Conclusions

The project shows that it is possible to engage students by teaching AG&L with approaches similar to the ones used for modern foreign languages and provides possible models for a more modern and stimulating way of teaching.

The debate on AG&L teaching in Italian high schools very often mentions time constraints and weak student motivation in learning languages considered too far from their own experiences. The strong motivation felt by the students in the labs and in the experimental classroom (who showed active commitment to learning even during summer holidays) is in stark contrast to the above, is a promising starting point, and gives reason for confidence in the further developments of the project.

Constant monitoring and support by university scholars, ensures a continued verification of the project's scientific soundness. During the supervision meetings particular attention has been paid to the need to make sure students also acquire explicit morphological and syntactic knowledge and metalinguistic skills, as part of their formation, and to the need for them to develop translation skills. As mentioned, the final exam of the Liceo Classico includes a translation from Ancient Greek or Latin into Italian, and students must be able to cope with it to the best of their abilities. We believe that the activities which are presented in this contribution also strengthen the students' preparation for their final exam, especially if one considers how they foster lexical knowledge and immediacy of understanding of the ancient text.

Through a communicative use of AG&L and the exposure to extensive reading practices, students have started to perceive AG&L texts as narratives rather than difficult puzzles to decipher.

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