

Hans Oerberg and his contribution to Latin pedagogy

David Carter

ASK A SIXTH former studying French or Russian to read a random page of Moliere or Tolstoi, and they will probably make a decent fist of it. Ask a sixth-former studying Latin to read a random page of Caesar or Ovid, and after only a line or two they will come grinding to a halt and have to reach for the dictionary.

Why is the fluency of students of Latin so abysmal when compared with that of students of modern languages? Latin teachers are fertile with excuses, but an outside observer would conclude that the inferior results are simply down to inferior teaching methods.

Modern Language (MFL) teaching is fast-paced, with teachers insisting that the language must be spoken as much as possible during class. As a result far more of the language goes through the student's head, which improves their vocabulary; they are forced to develop the ability to handle it at a brisk pace; and they have to process the words in the order they are spoken (what chance does any student have of ever becoming fluent who is taught such barbarisms as 'find the verb, the subject and the object?')

In short, the Direct Method acts as a discipline, which forces the student to develop the skills to read and speak the language quickly. Students of Latin on the other hand, encouraged to think of Latin as a sort of intellectual word puzzle which they have all the time in the world to translate, simply never read it fast enough to become fluent.

In revolt against the killing slowness of traditional Latin teaching many teachers have thought to apply the direct methods used in MFL. For such teachers the primary coursebook will usually be Hans Oerberg's *Lingua Latina per se illustrata*.

Hans Henning Oerberg (1920 – Feb 17 2010) was educated at the University of Copenhagen, and qualified as a teacher of English, French and Latin in 1946. Oerberg records that from the beginning he practised the Direct Method of teaching in his English and French lessons, but with Latin he found this impossible. However:

'I could see no reason why Latin should be taught by methods totally different from those used in the teaching of modern languages. I felt that Latin is a foreign language like other foreign languages and should be taught by similar methods. I was inspired by the work of English direct-method pioneers like W. H. D. Rouse and R. B. Appleton, and by my compatriot Otto Jespersen and his disciple Arthur M. Jensen, who had launched an English reading course called *English by the Nature Method*. His idea was to make every sentence presented to the students immediately intelligible *per se*, or *self-explanatory*, by grading and organizing the introduction of vocabulary and grammar. That means that there is no need to translate or explain grammatical points in the students' own language, they are enabled to discover for themselves directly the meaning of the words and sentences and the functioning of the grammatical rules.'

Oerberg published his first book, *Lingua Latina secundum naturae rationem explicata* in 1955. After many years of classroom teaching he revised it in 1990 and changed the title to *Lingua Latina per se illustrata* (from now on 'LL'). The LL course consists of two parts, *Familia Romana* and *Roma Aeterna*, along with a series of classic texts – Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*; Plautus *Menaechmi*, Petronius *Cena Trimalchionis*, Plautus *Amphitryo*, Sallustius et Cicero: *Catilina*.

Because LL is written entirely in Latin it may be used anywhere. It is popular in Europe, especially Spain and Italy, but also has followers in France, Portugal, Belgium, Germany, Czech Republic, Croatia and Poland. In Italy the *Lingua Latina* system has been recognised this year as the best recommendable alternative to traditional teaching by the Ministry of Education in Rome, largely

due to its championship by Luigi Miraglia, one of Italy's leading Latinists. In the United States *Lingua Latina* is quite widely used, especially at college level, and there is an active Oerberg List on the teachers' website www.latinteach.com.

However, in Britain Oerberg and LL are practically unknown. So in the remainder of this article I will describe the first book of the series, *Familia Romana*, in some detail for UK readers.

In theory - underlying principles

'The object', says O, 'is to accustom the student, from the start, to read and understand the Latin text as Latin without the interference of English, or with a minimum interference of English.'

To achieve this O. has written an elementary Latin text in which the student can infer the meaning and function of all new words and grammatical forms from the context. There are 35 chapters in *Familia Romana*. 'The text is carefully graded. The progressive introduction of words, inflections, and structures, with due regard to their frequency in Latin writers, should conform to a well defined program which not only ensures immediate comprehension, but also assimilation and consolidation owing to the constant recurrence in new surroundings of words and forms already introduced and understood.'

Students 'are enabled to work out for themselves, that is to infer or induce, the rules of grammar. No grammatical rule is formulated until the students have seen so many self-evident examples of the phenomenon in context that the rule only states something that they already 'feel in their bones'. Such inductive reasoning and learning *per exempla* is the most effective way to assimilate both vocabulary and grammar.'

In practice – teaching in class

Initially the teacher reads the Latin text, with correct stress and pronunciation, while the students follow in their books. The text runs two-thirds across the page; the remaining third holds notes on any new words or grammar. These take the form of pictures, or simple explanations in Latin.

After the teacher's reading the students do not have to translate the Latin into English, but individually are asked to read aloud portions of the text. From their phrasing and pronunciation of the Latin the teacher can usually tell whether they have understood or not.

Each chapter is followed by a section on grammar, *Grammatica Latina*, and three exercises, *Pensum A, B and C*. *Pensum A* is a grammatical exercise, where the missing *endings* are to be filled in. In *Pensum B* students are asked to fill the blanks with new *words* introduced in the chapter. *Pensum C* consists of questions to be answered with short Latin *sentences*.

The students are allowed to keep their books open during these exercises and to find the answers in the text. The fact, says O, that they are able to go to the correct point in the story to find the answer proves that they have understood the Latin. [Answers to all these exercises are provided within the Teacher's Materials handbook.]

O. demands that after the story starts only Latin should be used, but

'Living Latin' is ultimately not about learning to speak, it's about speaking to learn.'

– Prof. John Rassias
of Dartmouth College

he does not prohibit the use of English entirely. Before starting he is happy for the teacher to discuss the chapter in English. And if at the end of the story students are still puzzled by a Latin word even after the Latin explanations, a one or two word English equivalent is acceptable. Grammatical explanations can be in English.

Am I as pretty now as when you married me?

Finally, an extract from one of the stories to give a flavour of *Lingua Latina*. O. was emphatic that the stories must be enjoyable in themselves, to hold the students' attention, and to make them *benevoli, attenti, dociles*. Often they are informed with a certain sly humour. For example in *capitulum XIX* Iulius tells his wife Aemilia how he fell in love and married her because she was the most beautiful girl in Rome. A delicate conversation follows in which a man who doesn't know *num* from *nonne* will find himself in serious trouble:

Aemilia: *Num hodie minus pulchra sum quam tunc eram?*

Iulius (faciem uxoris intuens): *Certe matrona tam pulchra es quam virgo eras, mea Aemilia. Omnes pulchritudinem tuam laudant.* (Tum

vero formam eius spectans) *At minus gracilis es quam tunc. eo enim tempore gracilior eras quam hoc signum Veneris.*

Aemilia (signum Veneris aspicit, cuius corporis gracilius ac minus est quam ipsius): *Certe tam gracilis hodie non sum, sed quare me crassiorem fieri putas?*

Iulius (ridens respondet): *Quia nunc cibum meliorem es quam tunc edebas.*

Aemilia: *Id quod nunc edo nec melius nec peius est quam quod apud parentes meos edebam.*

Iulius: *Ergo plus es quam tunc, Aemilia*

A lecture by Hans Orberg describing the ideas behind *Lingua Latina per se illustrata* may be found on the website of the Association for the Reform of Latin Teaching (www.ARLT.co.uk). Editions of *Lingua Latina per se illustrata* are published by Focus Publishing in English-speaking countries, and by Domus Latina in Europe.

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Latin is a language,
Dead as Dead Can Be,
First it Killed the Romans,
Now It's Killing Me.
All are dead who spoke it.
All are dead who wrote it.
All are dead who learned it,
Lucky dead, they've earned it.

'When our classes focus predominantly on teaching students about the language rather than to use the language, classrooms become stifling environments where only the most capable students can be successful.'

– Martha Abbott

