

2. Viva Voce rather than Latine Loqui. From a case in Flanders to the international context

Christian Laes

ABSTRACT

The 'active' use of Latin (and Ancient Greek) was banned for decades in Flemish schools – Flanders being a region with a strong tradition in the teaching of classical languages. About 2017, the situation changed, slowly and drastically. Less than a decade later, one sees the same change in a worldwide context of classics teaching. Language immersion and fluent reading, rather than translating and solving grammatical puzzles, come prominently to the fore, and the accessibility of internet resources has opened horizons unseen before.

1. INTRODUCTION: FROM PERSONAL ENCOUNTER TO PEDAGOGICAL QUESTIONS

When, as a university student in my early twenties, I first encountered what was then termed 'Living Latin,' I did not yet foresee that this experience would shape my professional trajectory for decades.¹ Speaking Latin aloud, hearing it used spontaneously, and discovering that the language could function as a medium of communication rather than solely as an object of analysis profoundly altered my perception of studying ancient languages. Since then, sustained engagement with spoken Latin – and, by extension, renewed attention to Ancient Greek as a living linguistic system – has led me to re-examine fundamental assumptions about how these languages are taught.

My subsequent Latin teaching experience, both in secondary schools in Flanders (Belgium) and at universities in Belgium, Italy and the United Kingdom, has sharpened these reflections. In particular with my English students, I have repeatedly observed a striking phenomenon: embarrassment and reluctance to pronounce Latin aloud. This hesitation is not confined to complex discourse; it extends even to isolated words. The difficulty is not primarily intellectual, but mainly affective. Students are unsure and often apprehensive about vocalising a language they have studied largely through silent decoding.

(*) This is a reworked version of my Keynote at the Comprehensible Input in Ancient Languages Teaching Conference, Cambridge, 24 October 2025. I owe great thanks to Steven Hunt for organising such a wonderful event. I have expressed similar thoughts in Laes (2018), but since then, the subject has constantly needed updates. I can only be grateful for such evolution.

¹ See Lyvens (2024) for a recent survey of the Living Latin movement. In gratitude, I acknowledge my indebtedness to Caelestis Eichenseer (1924-2008), who initiated me in spoken Latin, at summer seminars in Wavre, Belgium, from 1992 to 1995.

Such observations raise a central question for contemporary didactics: how should we position ourselves with respect to comprehensible input in the teaching of Latin and Ancient Greek? By all means, we should be clear about how we understand this comprehensible input – *rem tene, verba sequuntur*, is a Latin motto I cherish profoundly. To me, it is all about the following question: how can we create conditions in which learners internalise meaning directly in the target language, rather than continually mediating it through translation?

To address this question, it is necessary to situate present debates within a broader historical and institutional context.

2. NIL NOVI SUB SOLE: EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY PRECEDENTS

Contemporary discussions on active Latin or spoken Ancient Greek are often framed as radical innovations. Yet a brief glance at the early twentieth century reveals that many of the principles currently promoted were articulated with clarity and conviction a century ago.

In 1924, the German classicist, gymnasium teacher and progressive pedagogical thinker Georg Wilhelm Otto Rosenthal (1874-1934) published his *Lebendiges Latein. Neue Wege im Lateinunterricht* (Oldenburg, Leipzig 1924), based on his teaching experiences that had started in 1901.² Rosenthal's dictum (*Gesehenes Latein ist kein Latein*: 'seen Latin is no Latin') captures his foundational insight: without an affective, internalised relationship to the language, Latin remains inert. For Rosenthal, Latin was not merely a system of morphological paradigms, declensions and declinations. His work anticipates many current emphases on engagement, discovery, and student-centred learning.

In 1902, also in the tradition of secondary school teaching, William Henry Denman Rouse (1863-1950), an eminent classicist and Sanskrit scholar, then the new headmaster of the Perse School in Cambridge, introduced his *Direct Method for Teaching Latin and Ancient Greek*.³ Rouse, associated with the reformist tradition in British classical education, insisted that students should encounter Latin as Latin, not as an encoded version of English. In 1913, Rouse founded the [Association for the Reform of Latin Teaching \(ARLT\)](#), which is still active today. Up to now, the ARLT counteracts excessive reliance on translation and rote grammar drills by encouraging active engagement with texts and oral practice.

It is clear that reformers like Rosenthal and Rouse did not advocate spoken Latin as an antiquarian pastime. Rather, they viewed oral and direct methods as tools for enhancing comprehension. Reading both these eminent classicists and pedagogical

² Fritsch (1990, p. 53); Schulz (1991); Lyvens (2024, pp. 17-18).

³ Stray (1992).

thinkers today, one is struck by the continuity between their arguments and those of contemporary proponents of comprehensible input.

3. A LONGER TRADITION: FROM SCHOOL DIALOGUES TO MODERN ADVOCACY

If the early twentieth century witnessed reformist efforts for active approaches to ancient languages, earlier centuries offer evidence of an even more deeply rooted oral tradition, especially for Latin in the tradition of the West. This should not come as a surprise. Before the nineteenth century, Latin indeed functioned across Western Europe as a medium of scholarly and – to a significant extent – ‘daily’ communication: in church, liturgy, diplomacy, and to a certain degree in practical encounters such as business.

Jesuit educational practice, among others, generated extensive collections of school dialogues in Latin. These texts depict students greeting teachers, negotiating academic performance, or conversing during recreation. Such materials presuppose that Latin was heard and spoken regularly within educational contexts.⁴

The nineteenth century marked a turning point. As industrialisation and new national educational systems transformed European societies, Latin and Greek lost their prestigious cultural status. The recurrent question, ‘Why study Latin?’ emerged with new urgency. In response, some advocates reimaged Latin as a unifying language for Europe.

Among them was the Spanish priest Miguel Maria del Olmo (? – 1831), who after the Congress of Vienna (1815) envisioned a Europe united by Latin: the project of a Latin city state.⁵ Arcadius Avellanus (1851-1935), original name Árkád Mogyoróssy, published extensively in American newspapers in defence of Latin as a communicative medium: his ambitious projects, pamphlets, prolific writing activities and organisations founded all testify of the (failed) internationalist dream of Latin as the lingua franca of a new and peaceful modern world.⁶ Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825-1895) edited and single-authored the Latin periodical *Alaudae*, while living in exile in l’Aquila, Italy. To Ulrichs, who also was a pioneering advocate of what would now be termed gay rights and because of this fled Prussian Germany, Latin could truly serve contemporary intellectual and political discourse – it is in fact hard to think of a contemporary topic that is not treated in his *Alaudae*.⁷

⁴ Tunberg (2012) is a superb overview. Laes (2014) for a remarkable example from Flanders. The *Dialogi Familiares* by Jesuit writer and teacher Antonius Van Torre became a schoolbook bestseller. Dialogues for language learning were already popular in Antiquity, see Dickey (2016). The [Colloquia Scholastica](#) on the *Vivarium Novum* website are a true treasury of material.

⁵ IJsewijn, Sacré (1993).

⁶ Lyvens (2024, pp. 87-120).

⁷ Ulrichs (2004).

These and other nineteenth-century efforts (there were in fact numerous promoters of Living Latin of that period) were often animated by a strong belief in progress and internationalism. The emergence and success of constructed and artificial languages such as Esperanto, Ido and Volapük belongs to the same intellectual climate. Although the catastrophe of the two world wars violently scattered this optimism, the aspiration to revitalise Latin as a spoken medium resurfaced periodically, in times when people were again dreaming of peace and progress in a united Europe.

4. POST-WAR REVIVAL AND INSTITUTIONALISATION

In 1956, the first International Congress for Living Latin (*Premier Congrès pour le Latin vivant*), held in Avignon and instigated by the French engineer and mathematician Jean Capelle (1909-1983) marked a renewed commitment to spoken Latin.⁸ The organising committee was convinced that Latin might serve as a neutral scientific language, to unite the scientific and politic community. A contemporary fervent proponent of Living Latin, Guy Licoppe (°1931) has repeatedly uttered his admiration for the international programme as it was initiated in Avignon – his views are often expressed in the Latin journal *Melissa*, which he has run uninterruptedly since 1984. Firmly based in the Catholic tradition, the Benedictine monk Caelestis Eichenseer (1924-2008) was a particularly influential figure for Living Latin in the later twentieth century, who cherished the international aspirations of Latin too. Through his numerous summer seminars (over hundred) all across Europe, he educated generations of teachers and enthusiast speakers. The periodical *Vox Latina*, published in Saarbrücken since 1965, and now ran by Sigrid Albert (°1952) remains a testament to sustained commitment to spoken Latin.

Yet it is crucial to carefully distinguish between two aims. On the one hand, there is the aspiration to restore Latin as a modern *lingua franca*, and ideal held dear in quite some *circuli Latini*. On the other hand, there is the didactical concern for improving comprehension of ancient texts. In a school context, the main concerns are obviously with the latter.

5. OBJECTIONS TO THE ‘ESPERANTO MODEL’

The notion that Latin might function as a contemporary international language – the ‘Esperanto model’ – raises legitimate concerns in formal educational contexts.⁹

⁸ Lyvens (2024, pp. 173-193), with an assessment of the movement.

⁹ Wingate (2013) – with whose criticism I would only agree to a minor extent. Still, I believe he makes good points. Interestingly, in some ways Luigi Miraglia, *De causis corruptae institutionis Latinae* (2014), has uttered similar criticism, at least about the hobbyist approaches of certain *Circuli Latini*. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OyhWKTmJBo&t=637s> (accessed 24 February 2026).

First, the creation and teaching of neologisms risk diverting the already limited classroom time from engagement with classical texts. While coining terms for modern inventions may be intellectually playful, it is pedagogically questionable whether such vocabulary should occupy central space in the curriculum. Second, the difference of registers between spoken and written language poses real challenges. Even fluent speakers of modern conversational Latin may struggle with the stylistic density of Tacitus, or the elaborate sentences by Cicero. Mastery of colloquial discourse does not automatically confer literary competence. Third, there is the danger of hobbyism. Spoken Latin is, for many, a source of genuine pleasure. Yet enthusiasm must not be imposed as an obligation. Pedagogy cannot be structured around the preferences of a subset of practitioners. Fourth, time constraints necessitate careful prioritisation. Literary interpretation, cultural history, and thorough comprehension remain essential components of classical education. Finally, there is the issue of teachers' preparedness and willingness to introduce active approaches. Not all instructors feel equipped to conduct conversations in Latin or Ancient Greek. Any prescriptive reform is difficult.

For these reasons, conversational fluency cannot and should not be posited as the primary objective of Latin and Greek instruction. Nevertheless, elements of active engagement may serve broader pedagogical ends, as I will demonstrate in what follows.

6. THE FLEMISH CONTEXT: PROHIBITION AND RECONSIDERATION

In Flanders, curricular developments since the late 1960s provide a telling case study. Earlier decades had witnessed intensive grammatical training, often supported by detailed manuals such as the famous Greek and Latin grammars by Jesuit Adhemar Geerebaert (1871 – 1944). Students devoted substantial weekly hours to Latin, yet frequently emerged unable to read fluently or compose effectively. The perceived failure of this model led to a decisive reaction: active use of Latin and Ancient Greek was formally discouraged or even prohibited. Reading and translation became the exclusive focus.

When, in 2017, a study day at the University of Antwerp addressed active approaches to Latin and Ancient Greek, the diversity of participants – students, teachers, inspectors, university professors – was striking. Although official curricula had long marginalised spoken elements, many educators had independently experimented with alternative methods. The event revealed both renewed interest and institutional hesitation.¹⁰

¹⁰ For a brief report, see Laes (2017).

A central topic was the role of easy readers versus the tendency to almost immediately go for 'authentic' Latin as it had been composed by writers of the Golden Age. Just as students of Russian rarely begin with Tolstoy, learners of Latin benefit from texts calibrated to their current competence. Short novellas employing limited vocabulary - sometimes as few as 500 words - allow for extended reading without constant recourse to dictionaries. The motivational impact of such experiences in fluent reading should not be underestimated. The subsequent publication of accessible Latin and Greek materials in the Low Countries further demonstrated that comprehensible input could coexist with rigorous standards of efficient language learning.¹¹

7. PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT

From discussions and subsequent classroom practice on comprehensible input, several principles emerge.

Early and Consistent Exposure to Spoken Language

Students should hear Latin or Greek from the very beginning of their studies. This does not entail elaborate theoretical lectures on pronunciation and phonology for beginners. Rather, instructors should model consistent pronunciation in routine classroom interactions. Over time, learners internalise phonetic patterns naturally.

Reading Aloud as Norm, Preferably Easy Dialogues

Reading is not solely a visual act. When students read texts aloud from the beginning of their studies, direct comprehension becomes habitual rather than exceptional. In advanced courses, collective reading out of metrical passages can precede individual performance, gradually building confidence.

Listening Without Textual Support

Listening exercises without written texts cultivate auditory processing skills. Short spoken passages may be introduced once or twice, followed by simple questions regarding content. Only subsequently is the written version introduced for closer analysis. Digital platforms now provide abundant recordings of adapted and authentic materials for easy listening.

Comprehension Checks in the Target Language

Simple yes/no questions or closed questions that only require brief responses in Latin or Greek reinforce syntax and vocabulary without imposing heavy productive demands. Such exercises emphasise understanding over translation.

¹¹ Laes (2021).

Music and Poetry

Hearing metrically complex poetry performed correctly demystifies its structure. Musical settings of canonical passages can make grammar memorable. Teachers need not perform themselves. High-quality recordings of ancient poetry are widely available, witness the *Tyrtarion* choir of *Vivarium Novum*.

Grammar Introduced by Play

Interactive activities illustrating grammatical topics – such as the indirect question or the infinitive clause – enable students to perceive structural differences dynamically rather than abstractly: *Video Marcum intrantem*. → *Video Marcum intrare*. / *Marcus flet*. → *Quid dixisti? Dixi Marcum flere*. / *Pluit*. → *Rogo an pluatur*.

Immersive Textbooks

The paradigm of immersive narrative remains *Lingua Latina per se illustrata* by Hans Ørberg. Its sustained Latin-only exposition, supported by images and marginal notes, exemplifies the immersive approach of the true language-bath. Comparable methods for Ancient Greek have likewise emerged.¹²

8. THE CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPE: 2017–2024 AND BEYOND

An increased attention to active approaches worldwide, combined with an accelerating international collaboration regarding these methods are evolutions I have witnessed since 2019, when I was elected president of the long-standing [Euroclassica](#) organisation.¹³ The annual conference *Nova et Vetera* of 2024 at Villa Falconieri in Frascati, the home of the [Vivarium Novum](#), explicitly connected current innovations with early twentieth-century reforms.¹⁴

What distinguishes the present moment is not merely enthusiasm, but also the increased possibility of mediums like the internet and subsequent distance learning. Just consider audio recordings of Ancient Greek. Once scarce, they are now abundant. Weekly broadcasts such as *Acropolis News* by University of St Andrews Classicist Juan Coderch now immerse students into every-day Ancient Greek on a weekly basis. Institutions and initiatives indeed proliferate: academies teach the immersive method, there are summer schools, online courses, and digital archives. In the bibliography, I offer a highly selective list of website and initiatives, out of which every teacher can pick what (s)he wishes. The result is unprecedented accessibility of superb quality.

¹² <https://subsidia.vivariumnovum.it/> (under *Familia Romana* and *Roma Aeterna*, for Latin and *Athenaze I* and *Athenaze II*, for Ancient Greek) offers about everything a teacher can wish for, not the least by the outstanding efforts and didactical publications of Luigi Miraglia. See also Díaz Ávila (2014) for an Ancient Greek immersive reader, going back to W. Rouse.

¹³ Hunt & Bulwer (2025).

¹⁴ Laes (2025).

9. CONCLUSION: THE AGE OF COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT

The present era may legitimately be described as the age of comprehensible input in classical language pedagogy. This does not entail abandoning translation, literary analysis, or philological precision. It does, however, require acknowledging that understanding arises most securely when learners encounter language as meaningful discourse rather than as a puzzle-like exercise.

Active elements – listening, reading aloud, easy readers, interactive questioning – should therefore be understood not as ends in themselves but as means to deeper textual competence. When students hear, speak and read Latin or Ancient Greek with increasing fluency, the transition to complex authors becomes less abrupt. The language ceases to be an alien code and becomes instead a structured yet intelligible medium.

Reform in Classics Education has always oscillated between innovation and reaction. The challenge today is not to resort to polarisation – repeating controversies from the past. We should rather strive to integrate insights from diverse traditions. If we retain clarity of our purpose – *rem tene* – the appropriate methods will follow. *Verba sequuntur*. And in the end, we will come to a better understanding of ancient texts and writers, the ultimate aim of our classical languages teaching.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Immersive approaches available online, with due attention to Comprehensible Input:

Addisco: <https://www.addisco.nl/>

Classical Greek and Latin: <https://coderch-greek-latin-grammar.weebly.com/>

Cultura Clasica: <https://culturaclasica.com/>

Elliniki Agogi: <https://ellinikiagogi.gr/en/>

Latinitium: <https://latinitium.com/> (Latin Audio Archive and the Pugio Bruti easy reader)

Polis: www.polisjerusalem.org

Schola Humanistica: <https://www.scholahumanistica.com/>

Schola Latina: <https://scholalatina.it/en/>

Vivarium Novum: www.vivariumnovum.net (Subsidia and Tyrtarion in particular)

REFERENCES

Díaz Ávila, M. (2014). *Alexandros. To Hellenikon Paidion. E libro A Greek Boy at Home a W.H.D. Rouse anno 1909 conscripto, nunc aucto atque multis exercitiis imaginibusque locupletato*, Guadix: Cultura Clásica.

- Dickey, E. (2016) *Learning Latin the Ancient Way. Latin Textbooks from the Ancient World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fritsch, A. (1990). *Lateinsprechen im Unterricht. Geschichte – Probleme – Möglichkeiten*, Bamberg: C.C. Buchners Verlag.
- Hunt, S. and Bulwer, J. (eds.). *Teaching Classics Worldwide. Successes, Challenges and Developments*, London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- IJsewijn, J. and Sacré, D. (1993). 'The Ultimate Efforts to Save Latin as the Means of International Communication,' *History of European Ideas*, 19, pp. 51-66.
- Laes, C. (2014). 'De dialogis Familiaribus Antonii Van Torre (1615-1679),' *Vox Latina* 50, 195, pp. 2-23.
- Laes, C. (2017). 'Ex Antverpia lux? De conventu quodam didascalico,' *Melissa* 197, pp. 3-4.
- Laes, C. (2018). 'Tussen droom en daad: Levend Latijn en Oudgrieks in het Vlaamse onderwijs,' *Kleio. Tijdschrift voor oude talen en antieke cultuur* 47, 1-2, pp. 70-86.
- Laes, C. (2021). 'Authentiek en eenvoudig Latijn. Verkooppraatje of reële kans?', in Velle, T. and Y. Maes, Y. (eds.), *Latijn anders? Waarom er nood is aan ander Latijn in de klas*, Gent: Skribis, pp. 93-105.
- Laes, C. (2024). 'Euroclassica Congress Frascati 2024,' *Cursor* 21, p. 22 + annex.
- Lyvens, K. (2024). *Living Latin (1880 - c. 2000): Ideology and Identity* (unpublished PhD, University of Manchester).
- Schulz, H. (1991). 'Lebendiges Latein auf deutscher Grundlage. Der Reformpädagoge Georg Rosenthal', *Latein und Griechisch in Berlin* 35, pp. 2-9.
- Stray, C. (1992). *The Living Word: W.H.D. Rouse and the Crisis of Classics in Edwardian England*, Bristol: Bristol Classical Press.
- Tunberg, T. (2012). *De rationibus quibus homines docti artem Latine colloquendi et ex tempore dicendi saeculis XVI et XVII coluerunt*, Louvain: Leuven University Press.
- Ulrichs, K. H. (2004). *Alaudae. Eine lateinische Zeitschrift 1889-1895. Nachdruck mit einer Einleitung von Wilfried Stroh*, Hamburg: MännerschwarmSkript Verlag.
- Wingate, H. (2013). 'The Natural Method of Teaching Latin: Its Origins, Rationale, and Prospects,' *The Classical World*, 106, 3, pp. 493-504.