

5. A Game of Two Halves: Enhancing student learning with comprehensible – and incomprehensible – input at the Open University

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ABSTRACT

The Open University module *Classical Latin: The Language of ancient Rome* innovates in combining language acquisition with the study of Roman culture and literature in translation. In this paper, we outline how beginner students engage with a range of materials in their studies, including complex literary texts in the original language. We then argue for the importance of listening comprehension in contributing to the fluent reading comprehension of Latin texts and describe some activities Mair uses to help her students develop their listening comprehension skills.

1. CONTEXT

Each year around 200 students take their first steps in Latin with the help of the Open University module *Classical Latin: The language of ancient Rome*. This is no standard beginners' Latin module, however: its innovative pedagogical approach, combining as it does the *ab initio* acquisition of Latin language with the study of Roman history, civilisation and literature in translation, makes *Classical Latin* a 'game of two halves' – one that places equal importance on gaining an understanding of Roman culture and the development of linguistic competence and that also recognises each endeavour as complementing the other. Nor is the innovative nature of this module limited to its structure and content. The academic team that developed the *Classical Latin* module materials, as well as many of the Associate Lecturers who tutor our students, have in various ways sought to generate, adapt and experiment with new pedagogical approaches in an effort to support and improve student learning. It is two of these experimental approaches that form the subject of this paper and make it too a 'game of two halves.' First, the use of what the authors are calling 'Incomprehensible Input': namely, activities based on unadapted passages of classical Latin which, unusually for an *ab initio* module, see beginners engaging with original texts that they are not yet able to translate. And second, in strong contrast with this, the provision of opportunities for students to experience and appreciate – both aurally and orally – Latin texts of a level that can be comprehended with their current linguistic proficiency while also promoting new language acquisition. These latter activities are consistent with the principles of Comprehensible Input (CI) in that, through them, students acquire new vocabulary and understanding of language features by meeting them in texts that are accessible at their current skill level and that allow them to build on their current capabilities.¹ The activities demonstrated augment the effectiveness of this

¹ The concept of 'Comprehensible Input' originated in Stephen Krashen's 'Input Hypothesis', one of five hypotheses outlined in his early language acquisition research. It proposes that learners acquire language when they understand input at one stage above their current level. He denoted their current level by 'i' and the level slightly above by 'i+1': Krashen (1982, pp. 21-29). For further definitions and

‘comprehensible input’ by scaffolding understanding with expressive reading, gesture and images. Crucially, the spirit in which they are undertaken is also intended to encourage lively and relaxed engagement from students in line with research into the influence of emotional factors on language learning.²

In the spirit of wishing to share our practice with fellow instructors and to inform and inspire others’ experiments in Latin teaching, we outline in this paper how we have used both ‘Incomprehensible Input’ and Comprehensible Input in our teaching, detailing what we see as the benefits of these approaches as we go. In the sections that follow, we first provide a brief overview of the *Classical Latin* module, including its design and pedagogical ambitions, then go on to outline our experiments with ‘Incomprehensible Input’ and Comprehensible Input respectively, before drawing the threads of our discussion together in our conclusion.

The teaching practices we describe in this paper draw inspiration from pedagogical research into the learning of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) as well as the emerging field of ancient language pedagogy. Like many MFL researchers, we feel that different theories need not necessarily be considered to be in conflict with one another, but rather provide alternative approaches to the challenges faced by instructors and students, and open our subject to the varied needs and preferences of individual students. This paper’s focus on the polar opposites of ‘Incomprehensible’ and Comprehensible Input demonstrates our openness and the eclectic practices that we employ with our students.

2. CLASSICAL LATIN: THE LANGUAGE OF ANCIENT ROME

The context in which Open University (OU) students learn Latin is A276 *Classical Latin: The language of ancient Rome*, a module aimed at complete beginners and largely taken as an optional component of either the BA Classical Studies or BA Arts & Humanities programmes.³ The radical way in which *Classical Latin* differs from similar modules at brick universities is that, like all OU modules, it is taught at a distance, using a mixture of print materials, interactive resources, and online tutorials.⁴ As mentioned above, it differs in terms of its structure, too, since it consists of two intertwined components: a language acquisition strand and a Roman civilisation strand. In each week, then, learners study both Latin language and related aspects

discussion of CI and its origins, see, for example: Rodgers & Richards (2014, pp. 264-267); Patrick (2015); Lloyd (2017, pp. 44-49 and 62-63); and Hunt (2022, pp. 51-58).

² The ‘Affective Filter Hypothesis’, a further language acquisition hypothesis put forward by Krashen, emphasises the importance of emotional factors: Krashen (1982, pp. 29-31). For a recent overview of the role of emotions in language learning, see Resnick *et al.* (2025).

³ Of the 230 students taking this module in 2025-26, 149 (65 per cent) were registered for a BA in Classical Studies and 40 (17 per cent) for a BA in Arts & Humanities, with the remainder taking A276 either as a standalone module or an elective part of another degree programme.

⁴ Notable, too, is that this is worth 60 CATS points, and so equivalent to half a year’s full-time study in a conventional university. In other UK HEIs, Latin modules are usually worth 15, 20 or 30 credits: see Lloyd & Robson (2023, p. 6).

of the history, literature and culture of ancient Rome (the main focus being on the Augustan era).

The language strand is relatively traditional in many ways, with students' work each week centred on reading and translating carefully graded synthetic Latin texts (mainly based on stories from Livy) and mastering new vocabulary and grammar. As is common with this kind of 'reading approach', there is an inductive element to grammar acquisition, with language features met in context before they are explicitly explained.⁵ The reading passages and grammar exercises benefit from some careful handholding and scaffolding as befits a beginners' context: generous reading notes are provided for the passages, for example, which are also supported by a Story Explorer (an online tool where students can click on individual words to reveal their meaning and parsing). This scaffolding spills over into the grammar exercises, too, which are designed to be eminently doable – as well as varied – with a view to building confidence and maintaining student interest.

The literature/culture strand is no doubt the more innovative element of *Classical Latin*. This forms a significant part of the module, with students spending roughly half their time studying Roman history and literature in translation. There are a number of advantages to this way of structuring the module, but the most important aspects of this pedagogical approach to highlight here are that:

1. It aims to integrate language learning into students' broader study of the ancient world (see further below⁶); and
2. It sees acquiring an understanding of Roman culture as a central part of both language learning and of linguistic competence.

Point 2 is aligned with the concept of Schema Theory, a schema being a 'set of assumptions formed through mental organisation of life experiences' (so a schema surrounding food shopping, for example, might involve unspoken assumptions about the use of supermarket trolleys and checkouts⁷). Crucially, schemata are never wholly identical for any two people and the possibility of a mismatch between the schemata of the writer/speaker and reader/listener is naturally that much greater the more their cultural backgrounds differ (assumptions around food shopping, e.g. between ancient and modern societies, being just one case in point).

The potential gap between the schemata of modern English speakers and those of ancient Roman writers is something we choose to address in the module by making the acquisition of cultural knowledge a central part of the learning journey. The

⁵ For an analysis of the pedagogical approaches of Latin and Greek textbooks, see Gay (2003). This is usefully supplemented by Hunt (2023, pp. 11-43) who provides a more recent overview of (and reflections on) contemporary approaches to the teaching and learning of Latin.

⁶ One objective was for the module to serve as an end in itself – and not just a stepping stone for more advanced study of the language.

⁷ Lloyd (2017, p. 68), drawing on Nuttall (2005, pp. 4-7). While Schema Theory has been subject to a certain amount of critique, it remains an influential and much-cited concept in MFL and ESL research.

principle here is that students' linguistic competence will be enhanced through awareness of the culture of those who spoke and wrote it. Importantly, however, for a module deliberately split between language and culture, we also see this process as working the other way round, too: that is to say, we believe that students can also better understand a culture through knowledge of its language. Not that this connection between language and culture is a new idea, of course, even in the context of Latin learning. It is, for example, foreshadowed by John Wilkins, one of the researchers behind the first edition of the *Cambridge Latin Course* (CLC) who proposes that knowledge of cultural and literary conventions is just as important to the acquisition of Latin as the mastery of formal grammar. In his 1969 formulation of a theory of classical language learning, Wilkins asserts that:

... the purely mechanistic skill [of decoding Latin] is ... difficult to teach, and the reason is that in so doing we are trying to separate off the cultural and literary aspects, which are just as much an integral part of the language as the formal grammar ... It is a fallacy, unfortunately widespread and deep-rooted, that we can learn language first ... and then move on to its literature and culture.⁸

Where the CLC broke new ground others followed, and many Latin and Greek beginners' textbooks developed over the last 50 years have sought to introduce a cultural component to support language acquisition (as well as to pique and sustain student interest in the language, no doubt). The innovation of the OU's *Classical Latin* module is the extent to which this element is foregrounded.⁹

So, how do we provide this literary and cultural input? As mentioned above, the thread that runs throughout the three Blocks of the module and binds the module materials together is the graded Latin reading passages, based on Livy. Through these, students learn about Roman history and culture, of course, but this knowledge is then used as a springboard for further study with various activities requiring students to engage with Livy's narrative in a critical way. In Block 1 of the module, for example, students look at the quasi-mythical account of early Rome that Livy constructs for his audience and compare this with the rest of the surviving evidence base for this period, studying both modern scholarship on early Rome and its material remains. As their studies progress, they move on to consider Roman ethics and morality, focusing in Block 2 on the theme of *exempla* which is so prominent in Livy. Students encounter other Augustan texts, too, such as the *Aeneid* (in Block 2) and erotic elegy (in Block

⁸ Wilkins (1969, p. 176).

⁹ The assessment of the module reflects this dual focus of students' learning. In the in-course assignments, just under half the marks are connected to grammar and translation questions, the rest deriving from short essays, some of which are on cultural topics while others are based around engagement with parallel translations. The exam is split into three parts: the first is purely linguistic (grammar and translation) and the third involves writing an essay on a literary-cum-cultural theme. For the second part, students can choose *either* a more advanced linguistic option *or* to compare and contrast two translations of a Latin passage (for which the original passage is also provided).

3), considering the ways in which different authors and genres reflect, problematise and, indeed, undermine Augustan values.

3. 'INCOMPREHENSIBLE' INPUT: WORKING WITH PARALLEL LATIN / ENGLISH TEXTS

Two further themes in *Classical Latin* are translation and translation theory. Students read texts in translation in this module – just as they read English translations of texts in their non-linguistic modules, of course – the difference being that they are increasingly invited to think about the process of translation in theoretical as well as practical terms. As the module progresses, students are invited to engage with the original Latin passages on which particular translations are based in ever more sophisticated ways. This is done by:

- looking at the translation of key words (e.g. the way translators render concepts such as *gloria*, *virtus*, *furor*);
- working with parallel texts (e.g. by looking how key words and key lines can or have been translated); and
- examining different translations of the same passage of Latin.

These activities are supported by discussions and readings in the module materials. For example, in Block 2 of the module students reflect on 'How to read a Latin poem' in a discussion which introduces them to features such as word order, sound, metre and figurative language through examples taken from the *Aeneid*.¹⁰ This ends with an activity based around Horace *Odes* 1.5 (*quis multa gracilis te puer ...?*) where students are invited to engage with the Latin text alongside an English translation, aided by an audio reading of the poem which they access via the module website. Importantly, students are also encouraged to read lines of Latin poetry aloud for themselves and to take pleasure in working with these original texts. It is activities such as these, where students work with unadapted Latin texts (whose grammar and vocabulary they are largely unable to understand at this stage in their studies), that we are calling Incomprehensible Input.

Later in the module, students' work on Latin texts and translation is extended in a section on 'How to read and translate a Latin poem'.¹¹ Here, students consider some of the ways in which scholars working in the field of Translation Studies understand and engage with concepts such as faithfulness, 'domestication' and 'foreignisation',¹² and audience – drawing once again on their previous study of Latin poetry. The section culminates in an engaging audio, where students hear from an academic

¹⁰ Swift *et al.* (2015, pp. 179-95).

¹¹ Paul *et al.* (2015, pp. 55-68).

¹² Terms originating with Venuti. 'Foreignisation' involves translating the text in such a way as to make readers aware that they are reading a text in translation (for example, by including anachronisms or by reflecting the word order of the original text), whereas 'domestication' involves 'reduc[ing]...the foreign text to target language cultural values' so as to make it immediately recognisable and intelligible to a reader (Venuti, 1995, p. 20).

(William Fitzgerald) and an academic-cum-translator (Henry Stead) about the practicalities and decisions that the process of translation involves. As part of this, students meet various translation of *Catullus* 63, and are invited to compare the original Latin text of the beginning of the poem not only with Guy Lee's *Oxford World Classics* translation but also with Stead's own version, which the author has previously delivered as part of a multi-media performance.¹³

Catullus 63.1-5

super alta vecta Attis celeri rate maria
Phrygium ut nemus citato cupide pede tetigit
adiitque opaca silvis redimita loca deae,
stimulatus ibi furente rabie, vagus animi,
devolsit ili acuto sibi pondera silice.

Guy Lee, The Poems of Catullus

Over the high seas Attis, carried in a speedy craft,
When he touched the grove in Phrygia eagerly with hurrying feet
And approached the Goddess' gloomy forest-girt domain,
There, by raving madness goaded, his wits astray,
He tore off with a sharp flint the burden of his groin.

Henry Stead, Attis

Over the heights of the marine deep
driven fast in a speeding ship
Attis with feisty foot touched down
and sped to the Phrygian grove
He landed at the evergreen
land of the goddess
and molten with madness mind
in a trance with a slit
and a slice of a sharp flint stone
tore off the weights of his groin ...

¹³ Lee (1990). For an 'audiovisual translation' of Stead's poem, see:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9eRbRBHd6HI> (accessed 26 February 2026).

Towards the end of the module, students are assessed on the skills they have developed through these activities. Part of the final assignment in the module requires them to compare and contrast two translations of a single passage – an exercise for which they are given the original Latin to refer to as well (see Figure 1).

Part 3 (50 marks)

In no more than 1,000 words, compare and contrast the versions of the passage from Virgil, *Aeneid* 12, given in Extracts 1 and 2 below. You should pay close attention to the different ways in which each poet chooses to translate Virgil's text, and the effects that these choices have on your reading of it. Do you find one translation, or parts of one of them, more effective than the other? You do not need to refer to the Latin text (Extract 3), but you may choose to do so if you wish.

These extracts are from the very end of Virgil's *Aeneid*, the last duel between Aeneas and Turnus. You are presented with two very different translations, a modern one (Extract 1) and a much older one (Extract 2). These two translations are very different in tone and style, and the one that you will read in Extract 2 is longer (so you will find that the line numbers are different both to Virgil's original and to the translation in Extract 1). The Latin text of this passage is provided in Extract 3. Note that in order to score high marks you need not refer to the original Latin; however, credit may be given if you do so.

**Extract 1: *The Aeneid*, translated by Shadi Bartsch
Book 12, 919–939**

As Turnus faltered, Aeneas saw his chance.
Raising his fatal spear, he put all his body 920
in the throw. No stone hurled from a siege engine
ever roared so loudly, no clap of thunder ever
crashed like this. The spear flew, a black tornado

Figure 1: A screenshot of part the final assignment of *Classical Latin: The language of ancient Rome*

Students are not obliged to engage with the Latin in this assignment (indeed, they are explicitly told that they can still score high marks if they do not). Most choose to do so, however, with some integrating discussion of the original Latin in pleasingly sophisticated ways.

One of the skills that students are being encouraged to develop through exercises of this kind is what we refer to as 'reading through translation'; that is to say, the ability to work with an English translation of a text in an informed way, with a sense of what might have been gained and lost in the process of translation – and with a sense, too, of the kind of questions that might reasonably be asked about the original text that lies behind it. There is also the ambition of making authentic literary Latin texts seem less daunting and of empowering students by exposing them to discussions of literary language and form in the discussions provided in the teaching materials. While Latin beginners would, of course, struggle to translate the unadapted poetry they meet, they can nevertheless be successfully exposed to features such as non-standard word order and sound effects such as assonance and alliteration. What students are taught,

we suggest, are useful, transferable skills that they can apply to the rest of their degree studies when they encounter literary sources in English translation (aided by parallel texts when appropriate). Importantly, too, developing in learners the skills of ‘reading through translation’ and working with parallel texts can help to bring together two strands of their studies – the linguistic and non-linguistic – which are regularly taught and conceived of separately in Classical Studies and Ancient History degree programmes. That is to say, central our pedagogical approach is an ambition to transform a ‘game of two halves’ into a more unified whole.¹⁴

4. COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT: LISTENING TO LATIN IN TUTORIALS

As well as online resources and print books, the OU’s model of distance learning includes tutorials, most commonly provided online in live (‘synchronous’) sessions led by an Associate Lecturer (AL). It is in this context that Mair, who has worked as an AL on the *Classical Latin* module for several years, builds on the principles of Comprehensible Input to deliver another of the ambitions we have for the module, namely enabling students to read, hear and understand Latin of an appropriate level with accuracy, fluency and enjoyment. While all students are able to listen privately to audio recordings of their Latin translation passages, which are available on the module website, Mair’s ambition for students who choose to attend her tutorials is for them to be able to read, listen to and understand Latin passages in Latin without turning them into English at all.¹⁵

One of the theories Mair draws on to justify her emphasis on understanding oral Latin input is the Simple View of Reading (SVR). While acknowledging the complexities involved in the process of reading, SVR claims that reading comprehension is built on two key components: (i) the ability to decode written words and make them into (internal) sound; and (ii) the ability to make meaning from that internal sound.¹⁶ According to SVR, then, the act of reading only differs from the act of listening in that it requires the additional task of turning marks on a page into sound.¹⁷ SVR has been extended to cover second language learning by Verhoeven and van Leeuw, who note that, without listening comprehension, reading comprehension is at risk.¹⁸ In her own work, Mair has suggested that this limiting of reading comprehension by a lack of focus on listening comprehension is likely to be detrimental to learners of classical languages, too, and regrets the absence of a focus on listening comprehension in Latin teaching in UK universities.¹⁹ That absence has been noted in recent surveys of

¹⁴ On this pedagogical model and its rationale, see further Robson (2010) and Lloyd & Robson (2019).

¹⁵ As Hunt (2023, p. 64) notes, Latin coursebooks characteristically ‘expect students to *work at* a story, rather than *read* it fluently’. The approach outlined here instead seeks to allow students to build towards genuine reading fluency by developing the listening comprehension skills crucial to its development.

¹⁶ As articulated in Hoover & Gough (1990) and discussed by Lloyd (2017, pp. 69-70).

¹⁷ Hoover & Gough (1990, pp. 127-128).

¹⁸ Verhoeven & van Leeuwe (2012, p. 1807).

¹⁹ Lloyd (2016, p. 70).

Greek and Latin instruction in UK Universities: while teachers and students may often read out Latin sentences in class, this is characteristically done as a preamble to translating and decoding Latin rather than making meaning from heard Latin itself (with or without a written text for students to follow).²⁰

5. LISTENING ACTIVITIES FOR BEGINNERS: THE CITY OF ROME

OU tutorials characteristically take place online using *Adobe Connect* (a platform not dissimilar to *Teams* or *Zoom*), with around 20 students in attendance. This section outlines the kind of activity that Mair employs with her students in the early days of the module, when most students are new to Latin. The passage used is taken from the module materials, but while some students may have already studied it themselves outside tutorials, others may not have seen it:

ecce! in pictūrā est Rōma antīqua, ubi Romānī antīquī habitābant. urbs Rōma est in Italiā sita. ōlim Rōma erat urbs parva, sed celeriter urbs crēscēbat, nam Rōmani erant virī bellicōsī et mīlitēs optimī.²¹

The basic set up of the activity is this. The passage is chunked and presented on a series of slides, each of which contains no more than ten words of text. Each slide also contains one or two pictures related to the text, which help to make the input comprehensible.²² On the first pass through the slides, students are invited to guess the meanings of words (though if a word, such as *ecce*, proves impossible to guess, students can simply be told). During this part of the tutorial, Mair can use the onscreen pointer to indicate which words are being discussed. When the text in Figure 2 is being discussed, for example, she points at Rome and then Italy. Since the emphasis is on comprehension rather than grammar, Mair avoids dwelling too much on a form such as *sita* (let alone parsing it): students can normally guess that it means ‘situated’ which is sufficient for them to understand the sentence.



Figure 2: A sample slide showing how segments of the text are presented to students, accompanied by images

²⁰ Lloyd & Robson (2018a; 2018b; 2023).

²¹ An English translation of this passage might read as follows: Look! In the picture is ancient Rome, where the ancient Romans lived. The city of Rome is situated in Italy. Rome was once a small city, but the city quickly grew, for the Romans were warlike men and excellent soldiers.

²² The technique of supporting comprehension with images is used throughout Cambridge School Classics Project's *Cambridge Latin Course* in its 'Model Sentences'. See for example Cambridge School Classics Project (2022, pp. 1-5).

Once the vocabulary in the slides has been explored in this way, Mair goes back to the beginning of the passage and moves forward through her slides again, this time focusing only on the Latin, though the images are still there to aid memory and understanding. She reads with exaggerated expression, making full use of tone of voice, speed of delivery, gestures and facial expressions to scaffold meaning.²³ For example, when saying the city was growing quickly (*sed celeriter urbs crēscēbat*) she speaks quickly, too, and moves her hands close together indicating something tiny before moving quickly to holding her arms wide to show something big. These ancillary clues encourage understanding in a way that is simply not possible with written text, of course. After one pass through with small chunks of text per slide, Mair moves to a slide with the full text and a small collage of all the pictures beside it and reads through one more time, again with exaggerated expression.

At this point, Mair moves on to a new set of activities each of which involves listening to the passage with all the visual clues removed. For this, students are offered a choice of four ways of interacting with the text they will hear:

- Write down the words you hear as a dictation;
- Repeat each phrase out loud saying it with as much expression as you can;
- Listen quietly with your eyes closed and imagine the scenes you hear described; or
- Draw quick cartoons/sketches of what the sentences mean.

Mair then reads out the passage without the text being visible on screen at all, leaving a little time between sentences for students who are writing, repeating or drawing to complete those actions. Experience suggests that this element of choice works well with students, since it allows them to engage in a way that suits them, as actively or passively as they like. The online nature of the tutorial also allows students to undertake their chosen activity privately without the fear of being judged – with microphones and cameras off, if they choose – especially liberating, perhaps, for students wishing to attempt repeating the Latin aloud.

These exercises were inspired by similar activities experienced by Mair while undertaking doctoral research at a Latin-speaking *conventiculum* in the University of Kentucky in Lexington. Reflecting on this experience, she said:

It was a revelation to me how trying to repeat or write down the spoken word in Lexington made me really focus on it and increased my understanding of it. Now when I want to understand a piece of difficult Latin, instead of looking for

²³ Krashen *et al.* (2018) call such extra-linguistic cues ‘Comprehension-Aiding Supplementation’. Relevant here, too, is the Input Processing Theory of VanPatten (1993), who suggests that, when listening, people strongly privilege the construction of meaning over any grammatical analysis of what they hear.

verbs, etc., or analysing it, I read it aloud expressively, or read it silently to myself as expressively as I can several times, and I find that helps me to get the gist of what is going on, or perhaps just the kind of thing that might be being said. So that if I convert the Latin to sound in my head and listen to it, I have a much better chance of it becoming comprehensible. This is what I want for my students too – that they develop understanding of Latin rather than changing Latin to English to understand it.

6. LISTENING ACTIVITIES FOR MORE ADVANCED LEARNERS: ECHO AND NARCISSUS

Listening activities can be used with learners of all levels, with the possibilities growing the more advanced students' knowledge of Latin becomes.²⁴ The following activity was originally used in the context of a small, online Latin speaking group, but as our presentation at the Cambridge conference demonstrated, it can also be used successfully with larger groups.

The text used in this activity is an extract from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and shows, we hope, how a reasonably challenging text can be made comprehensible and enjoyable. The passage in question is Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 3.377-390, which forms part of the story of Echo and Narcissus. Famously, Echo is unable to say anything herself unless someone else says it first, so her speech in this passage only ever mirrors the (final) words of what Narcissus says. Narcissus has no interest in Echo, but the same cannot be said of the nymph, who is strongly attracted to Narcissus and follows him through the woods where he is wandering, having lost his companions. The Latin text is reproduced below, with the text highlighted whenever Ovid indicates that one of these two characters speaks: Narcissus in blue and Echo in red.

forte puer comitum sēductus ab agmine fīdō
 dīxerat 'ecquis adest?' et 'adest!' responderat Ēchō.
 hic stupet, utque aciem partēs dīmittit in omnēs,
 vōce 'venī!' magnā clāmat; vocat illa vocantem.
 respicit et rūsus nūllō veniente 'quid' inquit
 'mē fugis?' et totidem, quot dīxit, verba recēpit.
 perstat et alternae dēceptus imāgine vōcis,
 'hūc coeāmus!' ait nūllīque libentius umquam
 respōnsūra sonō 'coeāmus' rettulit Ēchō
 et verbīs favet ipsa suīs ēgressaque silvā

²⁴ A number of different kinds of listening activities are based on principles of Comprehensible Input, examples of which are usefully detailed by Hunt (2023, pp. 51-57).

Tbat, ut iniceret spērātō bracchia collō.
 ille fugit fugiēnsque ‘manūs complexibus aufer;
 ante’ ait ‘ēmoriar, quam sit tibi cōpia nostrī.’
 rettulit illa nihil nisi ‘sit tibi cōpia nostrī.’

By filling in a few of the gaps where Ovid does not provide Echo’s words verbatim, the following script was drawn up to create a dialogue. (Note that the black text in parentheses represents the original Latin where the words of Echo are implied rather than spoken.)

Narcissus: ecquis adest?
 Echo: adest!
 Narcissus: venī!
 Echo: venī!
 (vocat illa vocantem)
 Narcissus: quid mē fugis?
 Echo: quid mē fugis?
 (totidem quot dīxit [Narcissus], verba recēpit)
 Narcissus: hūc coeāmus!
 Echo: coeāmus!
 Narcissus: manūs complexibus aufer! ante ēmoriar, quam sit tibi cōpia
 nostrī!
 Echo: sit tibi copia nostri!

This script can be used in various ways, but the method we chose to demonstrate in our presentation involved having two participants deliver the dialogue while a third took the part of Ovid as narrator and read the words in black. It is a good idea to rehearse this briefly in advance, so the actors can perform in as lively and comic a way as possible. In our demonstration, we had three experienced Latinist tutors doing the performance, but this could work equally well with some confident students recruited into the roles and given a little rehearsal time. Before our first performance of the script, Mair told our audience (representing our students) that they were going to participate in the second run through by playing Echo, mirroring Narcissus’ words along with our Echo actor (Mair).

Our first read through was also prefaced with an extemporized introduction in Latin by Mair, setting the playful tone with a view to moving the room into a ‘Latin bubble’ where

participants did not need to switch between languages but could enjoy understanding Latin at conversational speed:²⁵

ego Echo sum et pulcherrima sum, nonne? James est Narcissus et eum valde amo sed me non amat. est quoque pulcherrimus! ... nunc incipiamus. incipe quaeso!

Then, before the second read through, the audience was reminded of their role – once more in Latin:²⁶

iterum carmen recitabimus, sed nunc vos omnes eritis Echo et volo vos vividissime verba recitare. James, incipe iterum quaeso!

As you will see on the video linked to [here](#), following the example of our somewhat hammy actors, our ‘students’ felt liberated to join in with a level of enthusiasm that surprised and delighted us. This liveliness and fun are no doubt things that we would all like to see more of in our classrooms.

We completed the session with a reading of the full passage by our narrator (Christian) while Echo (Mair and audience) and Narcissus (James) read the parts in red and blue, with the fact that the dialogue that was already well understood helping to support, we hope, comprehension of other parts of the poem.

We hope that this exercise demonstrates how we can help more advanced students to practise their listening skills by hearing a performance and repeating some of its content, as well as by listening to instructions and explanations in Latin. Also, by drawing out a dialogue from the text and ensuring comprehension of that, we helped our ‘students’ to move toward being able to tackle the whole piece. Ovid’s account of the Echo and Narcissus story is a particularly suitable piece of Latin to adapt for performance in this way, but there are many other examples of texts with dialogues to be found both in Latin textbooks and in the wider Latin cannon. With imagination and enthusiasm, we can improve our students’ ability to understand spoken and thus written Latin, and do so in ways which encourage active participation by students and, importantly, bring fun and energy into the classroom.

7. CONCLUSIONS

In our two-handed presentation, we looked at two very different ways of engaging with and ‘comprehending’ Latin texts. James first highlighted the interdependence of cultural and linguistic content in the *Classical Latin* module and showed how texts that were ‘incomprehensible’ for students with only basic linguistic skills could nevertheless be accessed by making connections through key words, parallel texts and an understanding of the kind of decisions made by translators. Mair then took a text from

²⁵ A translation might read: ‘I am Echo and I’m extremely beautiful, aren’t I? James is Narcissus and I really love him but he doesn’t love me. He is also really beautiful! ... Now, let’s begin. Begin, please!’

²⁶ A translation might read: ‘We’ll read the poem out again, but now all of you will be Echo and I want you to read out the words in a really lively way. James, begin again, please!’

the OU's *Classical Latin* module and showed how it could be augmented with images, expressive delivery and a choice of activities to help students develop listening and thus reading comprehension skills. We then explored building towards comprehension of a more advanced text, Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 3.377-390, by making parts of it comprehensible through performance and repetition.

Something that the authors particularly value about the pedagogic experiments they each outlined in the presentation is just how different they are. Drawing on a range of theories and developing contrasting ways for our students to engage with Latin texts produces a richness in students' learning experience of which we are proud. To be sure, this eclecticism will inevitably result in students responding better to some learning activities than others; that is to say, not every student will enjoy every method we employ. However, we would argue that providing variety has clear benefits, too: it allows students to find their own preferred ways of studying and engaging with Latin, for example, and broadens learning horizons by taking students out of what they might previously have thought of as their comfort zones (being asked to work with unadapted texts or to comprehend Latin aurally might well seem daunting for a beginner in prospect, after all). Positive feedback and the strong retention and pass rates on this module would suggest that students typically enjoy *Classical Latin*, feel a strong sense of achievement on completing the module and, crucially, become confident and competent Latinists through their studies.²⁷ If our students' study of language and culture can be characterized a game of two halves, then, we are pleased that, for most students at least, it is a game that they ultimately win.

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²⁷ In 2024-25, 86.5 per cent of students initially registering for *Classical Latin* completed the module while 79.4 per cent passed, the second highest pass rate of any OU Arts & Humanities Level 2 module (equivalent to second year in a conventional university). This pass rate is significantly higher than that of the language-only module that *Classical Latin* replaced, *Reading Classical Latin*, which in its final year of presentation (2013-14) had a pass rate of just 58.1 per cent. In the most recent survey (2021-22), student satisfaction was 92.5 per cent (compared to a faculty average that year of 72.3 per cent).

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