

4. Reading Tacitus with A Level Pupils: Prioritising Latin over translation

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ABSTRACT

In her MEd (Transforming Practice) research project, completed 2023-2024, Polly Philp investigated how to help A level pupils in their struggle with Latin literature to develop their understanding and responses, with a case study on teaching Tacitus' *Annals* 12 to a Year 12 class. It argues that prioritising reading of the Latin itself, rather than responding to an English translation, helps pupils to engage more deeply with the text. It investigates classroom practice, homework exercises and assessment, informed by research on teaching reading in a second language and the practical restraints of the assessment criteria and requirements of A level. It involved the creation of a series of preparation exercises to serve as a foundation for independent engagement with the set text, and an investigation into the most effective sequencing of tasks and questioning to promote deeper engagement with literature.

PRESENTATION

We have to take for granted that at A level,¹ the level of language ability that is expected of pupils is far beyond their level. The rationale of my research project, which was a case study, was how can I help A level literature pupils develop their understanding and responses. I had the idea from essentially the frustration of giving them texts that are far too difficult, but not wanting to just spoon feed them, or handhold.

I was frustrated with the sequencing and the delivery of my literature lessons and trying to talk about Latin as Latin; not doing an English translation, doing all the analysis of the English and then sort of matching it back up to the Latin. So that was my rationale. I did a small case study. It was a thematic analysis with two research questions.

¹ A level examinations are taken by pupils aged 18+. Success at A levels provides access to universities. Prose Literature is a component of the examination in which pupils translate and comment on set texts in detail.

First, with an elaborate thematic map I made (Figure 1): what strategies could I implement to help pupils read Latin literature?

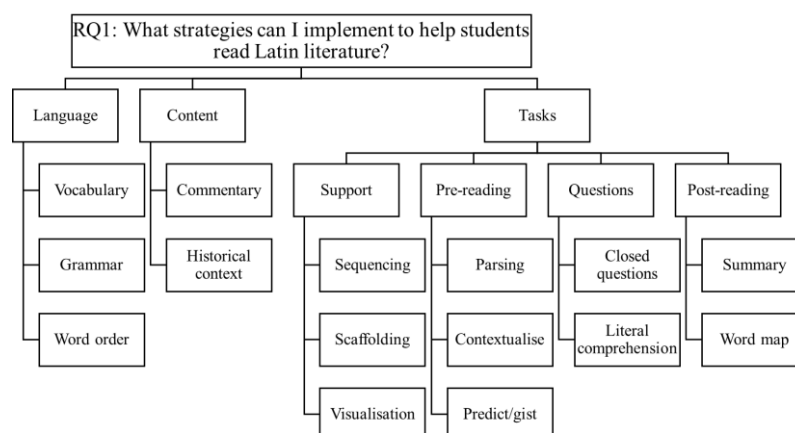


Figure 1: A diagram of the themes and sub-themes used to answer the first research question, breaking down elements of language and teaching that were addressed.

I divided this question into: what are the difficulties, and what are the things I do. So, for instance, issues with language vocabulary. My pupils do the WJEC GCSE:² they have about 500 words of Latin. To understand something when you are reading it, Nation suggests what you need is 98-99 per cent of vocabulary.³ I looked at just the first sentence of Tacitus that you have to read and they knew about 10 per cent. So, vocabulary is a big issue. Grammar at GCSE is also very sheltered in what you know; and then in Tacitus, there is a very high register, such as with grammar and word order. I have studied Tacitus for years and I enjoy how complicated it is, but I am teaching pupils who at GCSE at literature have only ever had the language with handholding. Very simply: is there something I can do where, as part of the process, I reorder Tacitus' language in a way that the pupils would expect it; not putting it into an English word order but putting it into something where they would expect to follow the Latin, for example the subject at the beginning, verb at the end. And then it is also quite interesting for stylistic analysis. We can look at the actual word order and ask: what is interesting about this?

In terms of the actual content, we need to consider historical context. The first bit of Tacitus that we read, you needed to know the whole family tree of the imperial family. I myself struggle to remember what 'first-cousin-once-removed' means and I'm looking at these really elaborate family trees: what can we do to try to help simplify that? And so on, with establishing just the essential historical context.

Next, I will discuss the tasks that I give pupils (the sequencing, the scaffolding, visualising things that can be seen in Figure 1), for example, the pre-reading activities, the actual questions I ask when we are doing the reading, and post-reading activities

² WJEC (Welsh Joint Examinations Council) is a national examinations board which offers Latin examinations for GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) for pupils aged 16.

³ Nation (2001, in Grabe, 2009).

as well, which consolidate information, and so on. At first, I break down sentences in quite minute detail, with very literal, closed comprehension questions. In the pre-reading activities, the pupils parse verbs; hopefully, that's also going to complement their language study, giving them a scaffold, like a spine of a passage just with the verbs. This is because part of being able to read fluently is developing automaticity: being able to look at a verb and knowing and understanding grammatical detail as well as the semantic meaning.⁴

Next, context, predicting and 'gisting'. To be able to predict what is going on and what is going to happen next in a story, you have to understand what has already happened; you need to understand plot, character, and so on. When they have done this preparation exercise, they have not written out a full translation; all they have done is get the overall gist of the passage and answered some questions. The exercise shows them that they can understand and summarise what is happening in a passage, even without a translation. Although I do not think my pupils believe me, translation is not the same thing as reading.⁵ So, I try to really drive home that reading and understanding comes before translation.

Then, my second research question, which concerns how I can also help them to engage with their set text. I wondered about what I can do as a teacher, cold calling all the time, balanced with pupils volunteering, and also different kinds of comprehension questions. This can be seen in Figure 2.

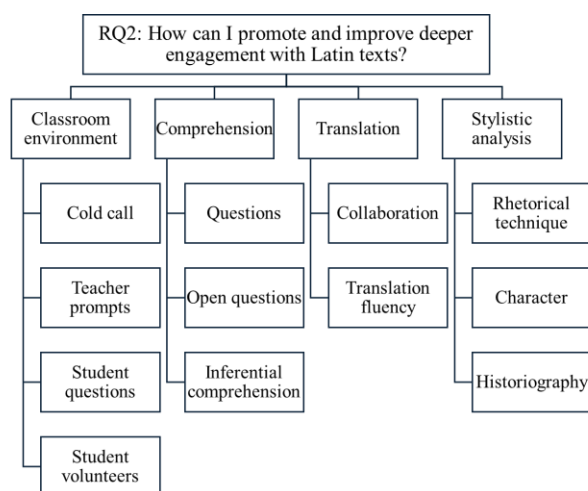


Figure 2: A diagram of themes and sub-themes used to answer the second research question, breaking down elements of the classroom environment, comprehension questions, and approaches to translation and stylistic analysis.

Eventually we do get to a translation; there is translation in the exam, but we do not always need to focus on translation. I try to give pupils ownership of their literature and translation in lessons: after we have done all the discussion and analysis, only then do we do a translation, and it is the pupil who does the translation and the other pupils listen to that pupil's translation. I am not the author of the translation. I give the pupils

⁴ Grabe (2009).

⁵ Hoyos (1997; 2006).

some hints, for example, 'Oh, can we do a bit more a natural wording there?' or I give a bit of correction on grammar. However, I try not to make it so that the pupils just listen to me at the end.

For practical advice, I will give some examples of what I do for my planning and lessons. Part of my Master's degree was to develop an artefact, which for me was a selection of preparation exercises that I made for Tacitus. I have 1 hour and 15 minutes a week with my literature pupils, with a weekly homework routine: either learning a bit of the set text or preparing the next bit. My pupils very quickly get into the routine of this, and over the course of the year I reduce the scaffolding of the exercises more and more.

For instance, there are pre-reading exercises, as I mentioned before, with a vocabulary focus. The pupils parse verbs – they do not know how to do this already. So, at first, I give really explicit instructions; I select all the verbs and participles for them; I may ignore things like gerundives at this point because they do not know what they are. But, as the year progresses, they need to find the verbs themselves. Maybe I will give some hints, like a number of bullet points, but by the end of the year, they find them entirely by themselves. This then helps with other pre-reading activities, with contextualising the passage. They have had to look up a lot of vocabulary, with their vocabulary gloss, but they have to get familiar with the vocabulary based on their parsing exercise. I then ask them to predict the gist of the passage, as the verbs often give you a spine for the story. I ask: 'What's going on in the passage?' They then have to write a sentence or two. They have already contextualised this passage, based on the previous passage; I may give them a more leading question, for example with Tacitus: 'What have Nero and Agrippina been arguing about?' All this is before they actually read the whole passage properly.

For the comprehension questions, I give the pupils lists of questions, per sentence. When I first started creating these exercises, it took me a long time to prepare, but now I'm used to the method. This comprehension is in English, in part because of practicality, considering the quantity of what we need to read at A level. I focus on beginning with literal comprehension, but at the end I may add in questions to start thinking about style and characterisation. Sometimes, to help, I would reorder the Latin sentence – not in an English word order, but in a more expected word order for them. Then at the end, I can say: 'Now, look at the original sentence, and how does this work in comparison? Does this order put emphasis on certain parts of the sentence?'

They then have summary questions at the end. At this point, they have not done any translation, just comprehension activities. I may add some other fun little things, like a word map for consolidating vocabulary.

I find that by doing these preparation exercises, in this sequence, in lessons we can much more quickly get to what is actually going on in the text. I can correct any misapprehensions, and we go through the questions, chunk by chunk. I will call on a pupil to answer a set of questions, then we do our stylistic analysis – word order,

vocabulary and so on – and then, only after we have done all the questions, comprehension, style, do we do the translation. This whole time they need to have in their mind their understanding of the text, but they're not just staring at their English translation, playing match. Fundamentally, it's a *Latin A* level. This is probably the main change I made to my sequencing. I think that, probably, the pupils find it a bit frustrating, because they don't have that comfort and crutch of the English translation (and sometimes, I might forget about the English translation and start to move on!). It also requires a high level of oracy as well; the pupils have to be really engaged; sometimes it can be a bit tiring to me to be 'on' all the time with them. However, I do think it helps with their depth of engagement and their consolidation of the text, because they've prepared it first, then we've gone through it in a lesson, then they have to learn it for a test, and later for revision. Part of really getting to know a text is that constant rereading, and trying to read it multiple times.

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