

7. Comprehensible Input as Inclusive Design for Ancient Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this short paper is to blend areas that are not usually considered together, but which have the potential to lead to more inclusive teaching. I write as a former Classics teacher, who is now a disability advisor with a special interest in neurodivergence. My key question is what it means to create an inclusive pedagogy that does not entail extra workload, but can lead to better pedagogical approaches, with better universal design. The intent is for all students to flourish, and in particular, for disabled students to flourish by design rather than through adjustments. This reduces the need for some degree of specialist input or change, while increasing student agency, dignity, progress, and wellbeing.

I argue that Comprehensible Input (CI) can be used to achieve just such an outcome. I use New Testament Greek as my material, but aim not to presuppose Greek familiarity. The New Testament has some particular quirks which make it uniquely suited to this discussion, but general principles can be extracted for application to other contexts.¹ I blend a reading of the Equality Act 2010 and its requirement for anticipatory adjustments, with an understanding of Universal Design for Learning, and Comprehensible Input as a way to achieve this.²

I start with an overview of CI from my perspective, without over-rehearsing the points already made by others.³ To be comprehensible, as set out by Paul Nation, a reader needs to understand between 95 per cent and 98 per cent of the vocabulary in a text.⁴ The text, for CI purposes, also needs to be compelling. Textbook sentences are frequently decontextualized and abstract, without making sense or carrying meaning

¹ See Ryan (2018, 2024) for more discussion about the specific challenges of teaching New Testament Greek.

² For an overview of Universal Design for Learning, see Levey (2023).

³ See the rest of the papers in this collection, but for some initial applications to ancient language teaching see Rogers (2019) and Patrick (2019).

⁴ Nation (2006).

for students. The New Testament, on the other hand, offers a meaningful story (i.e. the gospels) with real-world impact; its cultural value is significant, and its language rich but accessible. Merkle and Plummer rank the books by complexity of vocabulary and syntax.⁵ With a broad range of difficulty, levels and styles, the New Testament is demonstrably able to offer continuous grades of i+1 (to use Krashen's terminology⁶) that is comprehensible, compelling, rich and abundant. Luke is likely to have been the only 'native' Greek-speaking author of the New Testament (responsible for around 25 per cent of the text). This means that the majority of writers were already functioning in a second language. The New Testament is therefore already, in many ways, a model of second language acquisition in action. The writers are trying to express themselves, however imperfectly, in many of the same kinds of ways that we as teachers might be using the language with our students (particularly if communicative approaches are used).⁷

The New Testament lexicon incorporates roughly 5,500 different items (depending on how they are defined). This is well beyond what most readers will learn, and a 95-98 per cent coverage becomes unfeasible in any normal classroom setting. 1 John, my case study in this talk, is a beautiful mission statement for how to be a Christian. It also uses only 209 different words, which is well below the circa 500 words used in a standard textbook,⁸ or even the 90 per cent coverage list for the New Testament (901 words). The text is exceptionally syllogistic, which reinforces learning by using vocabulary repeatedly, and in ways which constantly define terms. Starting there, you can build up to reading something like Luke (2,222 words).⁹ Students are unlikely to have the time or inclination to learn all 5,500, particularly given that several thousand of those are hapax legomena. Blending the approach of Comprehensible Input, with careful text selection, and some elements of philological and lexical awareness, however, makes reading the New Testament much more realistic. That 901-word list of the 90 per cent most frequent words is learnable. It also takes you to a frequency of 13 times in the text. That amounts to about once every 20 chapters. Most New Testament textbooks would say you should aim for a minimum threshold of frequency of 50 uses, but aim for 30 if you can and, if you're really feeling brave, 10. 13 uses in the text is therefore already at a realistic good standard.

With 901 words, therefore, roughly comparable to an A level list,¹⁰ students are in a position to read the text within a relatively comfortable lexical frame. We can, however, improve on that very easily. CI may not be the sole strategy that supports students, but it can work alongside lexicological and morphological strands to support rapid

⁵ Merkle and Plummer (2017).

⁶ Krashen (1981, 1985, 1987, 1989).

⁷ On communicative approaches to ancient language teaching, see especially Lloyd & Hunt (2020).

⁸ A good example is Duff & Wenham (2008).

⁹ Statistics taken from TLG which uses United Bible Society's third edition of the text (Aland et al., 1975).

¹⁰ A level is the examination taken by students aged 17-18 in English schools. It is taken after roughly five years of learning a subject.

student learning. A good example is the verb ποιῶ (poiō, I make / do). I can teach students that verb. I can then teach them about that verb and related words.

ὁ ποιητής - this has a -τής suffix. It will therefore be a masculine, first declension agent. You now know you have got someone who does something. It is a poet.

τὸ ποιήμα (to poiēma) – this has a -μα suffix. It will therefore be neuter, third declension, the product of a verb. In other words, it is the poem.

ἡ ποιήσις (hē poiēsis) – this has a -σις suffix. It will therefore be feminine, third declension, the process of a verb. One returns to Philip Sydney and the art of poesie. Most students will not know *poesie* as an English word, but they can learn it.

This kind of word-building allows a reader to understand huge amounts of New Testament vocabulary without having to learn it in any active sense. Learning one word (the verb ποιῶ) has already opened up three more, and, by repeating the strategy with other stems, that large 5,500 total number of lexical items starts looking less daunting.

We see the productive word-building and instinctive understanding at play in the Gospel of Peter. The usual verb to crucify is σταυρῶ (stauroō). The omicron is part of a contract verb pattern that is factitive, making the contents of the verb happen; this is equivalent of -ify in English. ὁ σταυρός (stauros) is a cross, so σταυρῶ becomes 'cross-ify'. This may not be usual vocabulary, but it is important for the New Testament and related texts. In the Gospel of Peter we find σταυρίσκειν (stauriskein). This is a *hapax legomenon* in Greek, not appearing anywhere else in attested literature. Any reader with a good understanding of how Greek works, however, would understand it. There is the ὁ σταυρός root, with an -σκ- infix that marks a process, and a present active infinitive ending. It denotes making the cross-process happen. The writer might not have been able to remember σταυρῶ, but that does not matter. They created something unique but comprehensible. This successful communication is what we are aiming to teach students to navigate. Using prior knowledge, blending disciplinary approaches, students can quickly learn to work their way through a text without having to look everything up.

What, however, does this have to do with inclusive design or Universal Design for Learning? Inclusive design is an architectural principle wherein buildings are designed to meet multiple needs, reducing the need for specialist adaptation. The standard example is building ramps and stairs together, because then people can use entrances whether finding stairs easy, or needing a ramp for a wheelchair, pram, or luggage trolley etc. Universal Design for Learning applies this principle to education, aiming to ensure that learning is accessible by design rather than adaptation, as far as possible, with multimodal approaches. It requires building accessibility through creativity and multimodality from the start, which is effectively what CI already does.

The Equality Act 2010 requires educators to make anticipatory adjustments, acknowledging that disabled students will be present in any cohort.¹¹ We can predict that there will be neurodivergent people in most classes, given estimates of around 20 per cent of the population as neurodivergent. We can predict that we will, over the course of our teaching, encounter students with visual impairments, hearing impairments, mobility difficulties, or other disabilities and chronic conditions. We can predict and anticipate many needs, and have a legal duty to have done so. This can be reactive, but proactive curriculum and pedagogical design is going to be more successful and sustainable. I want to consider what practical design principles we can engage to ensure it already meets many needs, and adjustments become part of normal practice. This potentially improves teaching and learning in general. It also means less disclosure, fewer bespoke adjustments, and more dignity and progress for students. We can meet our legal duty while also improving education for everyone, which cannot be a bad thing. CI, I suggest, provides the pedagogical mechanism for doing precisely that.

My focus, now therefore, is to consider how the principles of CI can be applied to provide a Universal Design for Learning approach to ancient language teaching that therefore becomes a way to meet the Equality Act's anticipatory duty, with specific reference to neurodivergence.

The term neurodivergence (or neurodiversity) covers a broad range of characteristics, traits, and labels which describe and define ways in which a significant minority of the population's brains work differently to the majority, in specific ways. This includes what is often described as Specific Learning Difficulties such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia, but also conditions such as ADHD and autism. While each has its defining characteristics, or clusters of characteristics, there are many shared traits between the different conditions. One is poor working memory. What then of drills and spaced repetition? Another might be social imagination. When a teacher asks students to imagine a scene, what about those who cannot? When given decontextualised sentences that require inference of the context for understanding (why SHOULD *libera nos a malo* not be about apples?¹²), what if you just can't? We need to think of ways to help students keep things fresh in their mind, and sometimes supply the picture. Would a picture book version of a set text help? Could audio recordings of a text help supply a 'hook' so that a student can engage? Using principles of Comprehensible Input blended with other approaches can bring in the compelling element needed to support students struggling to tune in.

A further potential trait, common in ADHD, is Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD). Children with ADHD are likely to receive in the region of 20,000 extra negative messages about themselves by the age of twelve. They are also naturally wired to be

¹¹ Equality Act (2010).

¹² *libera nos a malo* - deliver us from evil (the Lord's prayer), where *malo* is the ablative of the adjective *malus*, used substantively, but is spelled the same as the ablative for apple.

more sensitive to criticism. You may have a student (indeed many students) who are likely to take criticism more harshly, while criticised more than their peers, and then we put them in a high exposure position in class. Research on language classrooms suggests that they need to be higher face than even other classrooms.¹³ We are asking students to make themselves vulnerable when they are learning languages. By definition, therefore, the language classroom also has to be a much higher face-saving classroom than any other form of classroom. Our teaching, therefore, needs to preserve face because we are teaching, because we are teaching languages, and because we are teaching languages to neurodivergent students.

We can build this through some of the lower-stakes or tiered work found in CI. We would immediately be improving our teaching, particularly for those who might be dealing with something like RSD. Including elements of communicative approaches, or total physical response, we could balance support of those with auditory or visual processing problems.¹⁴ We could use multimodal teaching methods to reduce the load on those who find writing hard.

Neurodivergent students may have what appears to be a lower threshold for boredom, that is, a tendency towards novelty-seeking, coupled with difficulties in managing and directing concentration. The emphasis on reading slightly challenging material that is both compelling and copious will help to keep students engaged. They may also have a higher need to understand their learning and the learning process than a neurotypical student. Building academic self-awareness and metacognition is, in all cases, positive for student progress.¹⁵ Understanding how and why Greek words mean certain things is much easier in context. Exploring why ‘father’ and ὁ πατήρ (ho patēr) are not simple equivalents is much easier when they are situated within the framework of a story. Students have a context in which to understand a word, and a meaningful story background to help them remember it.

CI, therefore, offers many elements of what would support neurodivergent students in managing some of the challenges they face in the classroom. I now introduce one way I have tried to build the multimodal approach required for successful Universal Design for Learning into my teaching using principles of CI. I have written workbooks for reading Luke, and the Johannine letters. These involve a range of strategies, including:

- 1.) Skim and summarise a text before translating it.
- 2.) Storyboard a text to reflect the story in general.
- 3.) Compare images of a text to consider how each one represents the text.
- 4.) Position yourself as a film director in a text; consider perspective within a story (e.g. in context does ἐρχομαι (erchomai) mean ‘I come’ or ‘I go’?).
- 5.) Create a short film that shows me elements of your translation approach.

¹³ Tin (2016).

¹⁴ For more on TPR in Classics teaching see Bracey (2019).

¹⁵ I expect to publish the results of a research project conducted into this approach later in 2026.

By building in such creativity, we are also invoking the higher order skills of Bloom's taxonomy. A CI approach may also use tiered versions of text, that is, versions that are written to bridge the gap between a student's current language level and the original text using an i+1 stepwise approach. Students can write their own tiered texts, or work with alternative tiered texts to build new versions. Creativity will enhance everyone's learning. By preparing tiered texts that are only a little taxing, rather than struggling through unadapted texts, student morale is kept higher, and RSD may be better countered. This also leaves more room for dictionary tasks, or translation comparisons, set against understanding vocabulary in context, and different understanding of Greek texts. We can blend philology, translation, and reading into one coherent learning experience. My work with CI does not mean ignoring some of the more traditional approaches, but blending them into a bigger architecture.

A multimodal approach also allows us to support students with auditory or visual processing problems. I have recorded the texts I teach, with each word highlighted as I speak it. Students can listen while reading, or instead of reading, whether in preparation or consolidation. I have also recorded discussions of the text as I annotate them, so students have a short version of a commentary / class discussion to work with. I can see from the analytics what students are listening to and when, and use that to create more similar resources. By managing my resources carefully, I gain the data I need to improve my teaching further.

I have taken Luke in particular as my example for tiering a text, as it is relatively challenging Greek (in New Testament terms). In this passage, there is an unclean spirit coming out of a host person and trying to find somewhere to go, wandering through waterless places. It goes back, finds little room, and then invites a whole host of demons to join.

V1: το ἀκαθαρτον πνευμα ἐξερχεται ἐκ του ἀνθρωπου. διερχεται δια τοπων χωρις ὕδρος. ζητει ἀναπαυσιν. οὐ εὕρισκει ἀναπαυσιν. το πνευμα λεγει 'ἐρχεται προς τον οἶκον μου, ἐξ οὐ ἐξηλθον. το πνευμα ἐρχεται και εὕρισκει τον οἶκον, ὅς ἐστι ἀγαθος. τοτε πορευεται και λαμβανει ἑπτα ἑτερα πονηρα πνευματα. εἰσερχεται εἰς τον οἶκον και οἶκει ἐκει. τα ἑτερα πνευματα ἐστι μαλλον κακα ἢ το πρωτον πνευμα.

V2: ὅτε το ἀκαθαρτον πνευμα ἐξερχεται ἐκ του ἀνθρωπου, διερχεται δι' ἀνυδρων τοπων ζητουν ἀναπαυσιν και μη εὕρισκον. λεγει 'ὑποστρεψω εἰς τον οἶκον μου, ὅθεν ἐξηλθον. Ἐλθεν και εὕρισκει τον οἶκον σεσαρωμενον και κεκοσμημενον. τοτε πορευεται και παραλαμβάνει ἑπτα ἑτερα πονηρα πνευματα, και εἰσερχεται και κατοικει ἐκει. τα ἄλλα πνευματα του ἀνθρωπου ἐστι μαλλον κακα ἢ το πρωτον.

'Original': 24 Ὅταν τὸ ἀκάθαρτον πνεῦμα ἐξέλθῃ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, διέρχεται δι' ἀνύδρων τόπων ζητοῦν ἀνάπαυσιν καὶ μὴ εὕρισκον· [τότε] λέγει, Ὑποστρέψω εἰς τὸν οἶκόν μου ὅθεν ἐξηλθον 25 καὶ ἐλθὼν εὕρισκει σεσαρωμένον καὶ κεκοσμημένον. 26 τότε πορεύεται καὶ παραλαμβάνει ἕτερα πνεύματα πονηρότερα ἑαυτοῦ ἑπτὰ καὶ

εἰσελθόντα κατοικεῖ ἐκεῖ καὶ γίνεται τὰ ἔσχατα τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐκείνου χείρονα τῶν πρώτων.

A basic translation (by the author): Whenever an unclean spirit comes out of a man, it goes through waterless places looking for somewhere to rest, and fails to find one. Then it says 'I will return to my house, to where I came from'. When it returns, it finds it swept out and organised. Then it goes and brings over seven other spirits more wicked than it. Once they've arrived, they live there. And so, we find that the final state of that man is worse than the former one.

In adapting it, I have made changes such as:

- a.) Writing in a more natural English word order.
- b.) Adding in names for pronouns.
- c.) Removing most accents as visual noise in the first instance.
- d.) Replacing unfamiliar vocab with more familiar words where possible.
- e.) Making clauses paratactic rather than syntactic.

The phrases are short, the text fairly easy to read. It does take a lot of work, but once done, can be reused. The work large balances out with more traditional teaching preparation, but is perhaps more front-loaded, creating resources ahead of time. The time investment is repaid in the teaching gains. I've given them a very basic version, a midway version, and then Luke's text. They therefore read the story three times, which builds in spaced repetition in a meaningful context. Many neurodivergent students will struggle with spaced repetition, given problems with time management, concentration, executive function, working memory etc. Pushing a methodology that alienates such students may leave them disillusioned, whereas building it into meaningful teaching practice helps to draw them in.

I ask students to read the tiered text, and perhaps engage in some of the activities, as their preparation for class. I set time limits rather than line limits. Students are no longer faced with the big jump from textbook to text, or with unadapted text on their own. Their anxiety levels are lower, and their rejection responses less strident, as they become more comfortable with the idea that the challenge is not beyond them, and they will be accepted wherever they have got to with it. Class trust needs to be high, but this brings us back to what we already know about language class dynamics and the need for high face-saving environments. This approach leads to a coaching style of language teaching, which is also in line with current research trends. It encourages flexibility of thinking as we compare the different versions of the text. It prioritises reading and understanding over translating, which is particularly important when it comes to the New Testament, when so much has historically been at stake in translating it.

Returning finally to this sense of the New Testament as different, I do think that it provides a unique and powerful teaching resource. I was once called a heretic by a student, for explaining a textual variant for Jesus as Son of Man / God. The impact of

textual criticism was given powerful weight, and the class were able to have a deep discussion about scholarship and faith. It reminded me, again, how teaching has a real-world impact. Taking a multimodal approach (Universal Design for Learning) with a CI strategy builds plurality and creativity into teaching, challenging students to become independent critical thinkers. Reading text, particularly a text like the New Testament, is not decontextualised, arbitrary, meaningless sentences. It is a form of communication, which is a human process affecting who and how people are. Thinking about the weight of this aspect forces an ethics of pedagogy that can be overlooked elsewhere.

In conclusion, therefore, I am suggesting that an approach based on CI can be used within a framework of multimodal approaches to offer an inherently inclusive teaching and learning environment. CI is not the sole teaching strategy that will work for all students in all contexts. It is, however, a powerful way to draw students into meaningful reading. The New Testament is such an important text that in experimenting with a CI approach to teaching, it bears very particular fruit, showing up the intellectual, pedagogical, ethical, and even spiritual impact of any new methodology. Experimenting carefully here has shown me that we can meet the Equality Act's anticipatory duty, and genuinely improve education for neurodivergent students, without a significant overall impact on teaching workloads.

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