

6. From Classroom to Cambridge: A case study in Comprehensible Input teaching

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ABSTRACT

This talk reports on the progress made at Haileybury College, where Dr. Sam Koon has introduced the teaching of Latin and Greek through the comprehensible input (CI) approach. The session will share a practical case study: the journey of one pupil from their first Latin lessons in Year 7 to a successful application to study Classics at the University of Cambridge. The talk will outline the concrete methods used to adapt CI pedagogy at different stages of the school curriculum, from early language acquisition to preparation for public examinations and university entrance. The session aims to demonstrate not only that CI can increase pupil retention but also that it produces results.

1. CONTEXT

Dr. Sam Koon introduced the teaching of Latin and Greek through the Comprehensible Input (CI) approach to Haileybury College (a co-educational boarding school in Hertfordshire) in 2018, making Haileybury the leading CI department in the country. CI has been a great success for Haileybury: pupils are enjoying the subject more, and more are studying the subject beyond KS3. Classical subjects are also competing successfully against Modern Foreign Languages: the four modern languages offered at Haileybury this year recruited 60 pupils combined against 40 studying classical languages. Finally, pupils who previously would have perceived classical languages as 'too hard' are now willing to study Latin.

Many people new to CI fear that the approach will come at the expense of results in public examinations or that it means pupils cannot read the language well enough to make competitive university applications. This has not been the case at Haileybury: only last year, one pupil taught using Comprehensible Input from Year 7 to Year 13 made a successful application to Cambridge to read Classics.

Below are the key CI teaching methods a Haileybury pupil experiences and how the approach changes as pupils through the school.

2. PRINCIPLES OF CI AT HAILEYBURY

The key principle of CI teaching at Haileybury is that the material read must be both comprehensible and compelling.

- In order for a text to be comprehensible, a pupil needs to be able to recognise 98 per cent of the vocabulary they see. This does not include glossed vocabulary.

- To be compelling, the text needs to be enjoyable, or interesting, or thought-provoking in some way. Often, that means the text is part of a longer narrative, but not always.
- In addition, the department avoids lessons that consist solely of translating ten sentences from English into Latin or from Latin into English, on the grounds that the content of those sentences is not compelling. Translation and prose composition are important skills, but we can develop these skills with compelling texts.

For CI to be successful, pupils must read large amounts of text. At Haileybury, the goal is ‘challenge 250’: that is, pupils should read 250 words of Latin within a 40-minute lesson period. It is worth being clear that this goal is not unique words: repeated uses of the same word, and re-reading texts, all count towards this goal.

3. KEY STAGES 3 AND 4

In Key Stages 3 and 4¹ the curriculum is primarily based on ‘novellas’: short Latin stories retelling favourite myths, such as Ariadna and the Minotaur.² Many of those are from Andrew Olimpi’s *Comprehensible Classics* series, but we have also written our own stories in house, and use the early chapters of Ørberg’s *Familia Romana* in the first weeks of Year 7.³

What these stories have in common is that they are comprehensible and compelling: the word count is sheltered, but the grammar is not (in contrast to courses such as the *Cambridge Latin Course* or John Taylor’s *Latin to GCSE*, where, for example, the different case endings are introduced in individual stages).

By keeping the individual word count low, pupils see the same words again and again. For example, one Year 8⁴ text has 120 unique Latin words, of which 45 are English cognates.

Crucially, there are very few glosses in these texts. The cognitive load created by glosses is just so high: many teachers have had the experience of pupils struggling to work with a gloss list. For learners, using an alphabetised gloss list involves:

1. recognising the indicator that the word is glossed (if one is given at all, as many texts only give the underline or similar indicator on the word’s initial appearance);
2. locating the gloss, tracking across or down the page and often having to use the alphabet to locate the gloss within a longer list;
3. identifying the word they are looking for in the glossed list, reverting the new piece of vocabulary to its nominative or principal parts; and

¹ Key Stage 3 is the first period of secondary school, for pupils aged 11-14; Key Stage 4 is the period of study for GCSE examinations, for pupils aged 15-16.

² See, for example, Ash (2019), Hunt (2022) and Ramsby (2022).

³ Year 7 is the first year of Key Stage 3, when pupils are aged 11.

⁴ Pupils are aged between 12-13 in Year 8.

4. returning to their place in the main text, then recalling what they thought the rest of the sentence was doing and applying the new information.

The cognitive load is too high and can be demoralising for many learners.

So, as a department, we avoid glosses where possible. This is achieved firstly by using or creating texts that shelter vocabulary (limiting the number of unique words). Secondly, we use cognates as far as possible (*rapide* rather than *celeriter*, for example). Thirdly, we use pictures to introduce a word: they find it much easier to understand that *navis* is a ship when it is dual coded (the teacher points to the drawing of the ship every time she says *navis*). Finally, where glosses are unavoidable, we put all glosses in-line with one meaning. This keeps the load on working memory and eye movement to a minimum.

While the grammar is not sheltered (it is not uncommon to see present subjunctives or gerundives in beginner texts), we do use or create texts that support pupils' reading. For example, Key Stage 3 CI texts contain pronouns like *ego* where an authentic text would not use them, or use adverbs like *mox* [soon] or *antea* [before] to flag changes of tense. This means pupils can read the texts freely, and teachers can draw learners' attention to the changes in verb endings after they have already understood the verb's meaning.

4. CI LESSON ACTIVITIES

Firstly, to start the lesson, we often use a pyramid.

The concept of the pyramid is that it begins with a single word or short phrase that lengthens repetitively. Pyramids often introduce new vocabulary by utilising cognates or context to prompt deduction. Alternatively, where a new word is glossed, the pyramid's structure ensures pupils encounter the term repeatedly (perhaps six times) as the lines progressively lengthen (see Figure 1).

The pyramids are also a fantastic tool because they activate pupils' prior learning of longer stories. Finally, they enable teachers to point out grammatical features such as the gender of nouns and the superlative in the example below.



Figure 1: Example of pyramid starters at Key Stage 3

It is rare at Haileybury for pupils to read texts silently and independently, especially at Key Stage 3. Usually, a teacher will read the text aloud in Latin, then go back to the start, put a finger underneath each word and expect the class as a chorus to either reread or translate the text. The confidence and volume of the pupils is a great way to assess if they know the text; it also doubles the word count, because they hear the teacher read the text, then read it again themselves. Pupils also gain greater confidence reading aloud in Latin, because they have heard the teacher pronounce the same words. Easier passages might be read aloud in Latin by the teacher without choral translation, whereas harder passages demand more questioning and prompting.

Within our lessons, there is relatively little written translation of these texts. Partly, this is because the texts are comprehensible, so pupils should not need to write a translation, but rather understand the text as we read together. As teachers, however, we need to assess whether the text is comprehensible by all pupils. There are a number of ways to do this:

- Memory games: either an old-fashioned dictation (reading a text aloud and asking the pupils to write it down after a second or third hearing) or a memory game where various sentences from the text are displayed on the board then removed. Both these methods develop pupils' working memory and build the association of words' spoken and written forms. Asking pupils to translate the sentences into English at the end of the activity allows the teacher to assess comprehension of grammar or vocabulary without pupils spending a long time on extensive written translation.
- 'Listen while you draw': the teacher reads a text aloud in Latin and the pupils draw what they hear. That might be a description of a character or even a short scene or a sequence of scenes from the story.
- The teacher provides statements in Latin summarising the text and asks pupils whether they are true or false. These assess whether or not the pupils have understood the story and can be written by the teacher to focus on new vocabulary. Asking pupils to correct any false statements by rewriting them in Latin means pupils have to engage with the Latin. Teacher corrections of these rewritten statements can prompt changes, such as prompting pupils to put an - m on a noun in the accusative, without spending an entire lesson on grammar.
- Comprehension questions in Latin: at this stage, we explicitly encourage the pupils to find the relevant piece of Latin from the text and copy it down to answer the question. So, the question itself is in Latin (more input), they re-read the text to find the answer (more input), they write down their answer, then they hear the teacher correcting the answers (more input). This activity can be differentiated by grading the questions from easier to harder (e.g. which require

finding and copying a sentence from the text and which demand a change of ending or lateral thinking). When pupils ask for advice on harder questions (e.g. changing a first-person to a third-person ending), the teacher can explain this to them, so pupils are learning about the significance of word endings, but in a drip-fed rather than grammar-first way.

There are other ways to assess comprehension, such as writing summaries in English, answering comprehension questions in English, or getting pupils to create storyboard summaries, but these are less valuable as they do not generally come with the bonus of increasing good quality Latin input from the teacher.

Lessons built from components like these make up the majority of our 'language' teaching both at Key Stages 3 and 4⁵. The differences would be the sheltering of vocabulary (moving from 140 words in a Year 7 novella, to 320 in a Year 11⁶) and the removal of grammatical supports such as pronouns.

5. ALTERNATIVES TO NOVELLAS

Many departments are working on shoe-string budgets, and purchasing two or three novellas for a year's teaching instead of a single textbook just is not possible for everyone. However, there are alternatives. One way is to reuse the Latin from already-purchased textbooks. I did this a few years ago with the narrative texts from Latin to GCSE 1 that tell the story of Aeneas. I extracted the texts, added the activities I mentioned before (memory games, dictation, pyramids) to reinforce vocabulary and adjusted the glosses as needed.

6. BUT WHAT ABOUT THE GRAMMAR?

Many teachers' fear or criticism of CI is that pupils will not understand the grammar. I have already touched on how we introduce grammar in Key Stage 3 lessons, but, of course, there is the component in the GCSE examination where pupils need to answer grammar questions or write in Latin.

At GCSE we start to introduce grammatical terminology more intentionally. Crucially, this still follows their reading i.e. pupils will have encountered a grammatical feature many times in context before we discuss it explicitly. For example, I might in one lesson draw my class's attention to imperfect tense verbs through the *ba* sound. In a subsequent lesson, I would talk more about how we translate these verbs and the difference in meaning between the imperfect and perfect tense verbs in the text. In the next lesson I might then ask them to identify as many verbs as they can in the imperfect tense. That is all that is necessary for success at GCSE grammar questions. Other examiners' favourites, such as prepositions, can be tackled similarly.

⁵ Key Stage 3: pupils aged between 11-14; Key Stage 4: pupils aged 15-16.

⁶ Year 7: pupils aged 11-12; Year 11: pupils aged 15-16.

7. LITERATURE TEACHING

For literature teaching, we use tiered readers. These are wonderful tools that enable us to maintain high word counts in lessons where pupils might only read a few lines of the set text, and give pupils access without leaving them to struggle with A level / post-A level grammar independently or resort entirely to rote learning.

Tiered readers should be combined with some of the methods I use for a ‘language’ lesson to increase word count: for example, a pyramid (using the GCSE vocabulary⁷) to introduce the text’s author. This example also gets pupils practising imperfect tense versus present tense (Figure 2).

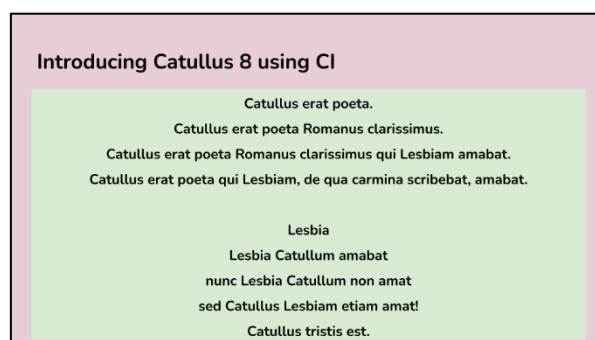


Figure 2: Context pyramid, using GCSE Latin

8. SIXTH FORM

At Haileybury in the Sixth Form,⁸ in some ways, little changes in our approach: we still use many of the methods I have already covered. We often use *Familia Romana* with Lower Sixth pupils, as it is fantastic for vocabulary, especially poetry, and also for encouraging pupils to work out the meaning of words independently from context. We are still aiming for 98 per cent recognition, but where pupils encounter unfamiliar words, especially non-cognates, I want them to first try to establish a word’s meaning independently before asking me as the teacher. The aim is to prepare pupils for A Level language papers, where there is no prescribed vocabulary list, and to enable them to read authentic texts independently.

The other benefit of *Familia Romana* for us, and a difference for our Sixth Form teaching, is the grammar exercises that come at the end of each chapter. We use these exercises (and/or prose composition courses) to formalise pupils’ knowledge of grammar so they feel confident with unseen verse translation.⁹ Prose composition¹⁰ shows that our pupils often have an instinct for what does and does not look right,

⁷ The examination boards provide a list of around 450 words (the ‘Defined Vocabulary List’) which will not be glossed in the GCSE examination.

⁸ Sixth Form is the period when pupils study for A level examinations, aged 17-18.

⁹ ‘Unseen’ translation is sometimes referred to as ‘at sight’ translation, in which the pupil should translate a passage of Latin into English without having seen the passage before.

¹⁰ Prose composition is the translation of English prose sentences or passages into Latin prose.

based on their extensive reading. The exercises give them confidence and get rid of any misunderstandings.

For prescribed literature, we continue with tiered readers in the ways I've outlined above. However, I would also create tiered readers for difficult unseen translations. For example, if I want to get my pupils familiar with Livy's style, but know they cannot yet read an unseen, I would create a tiered reader for it. This then allows me to point out the differences between my 'easier' version and Livy's (for example, historic infinitives).

Finally, Sam Koon has developed a programme of re-reading authentic texts over a sequence of four lessons. Each lesson, we re-read the same text. In the first lesson, the teacher takes the pupils through the text line by line in the traditional way. In the second, the pupils take the teacher through what they remember with support from the teacher. In the third, pupils and teacher re-read the text together in Latin. In the fourth, they re-read the text in Latin quickly. If there is a particular grammatical point pupils struggle with in literature or unseen reading, the teacher can use the exact text as an example. Pupils are able to focus on the grammar, because they already know what the text means. As teachers, we need to trust that authentic Latin will contain the grammar pupils need to know.

Over a year, pupils could read eight to ten authentic texts of about 150–200 words. This gives them lots of confidence and exposes them to different types of Latin, starting with easier – but still interesting – authentic texts such as the *Prologue of John*, moving through to Cicero, and ultimately to poetry. Needless to say, this exposure to different Latin authors is also excellent preparation for university interviews.

9. CONCLUSION

CI at Haileybury has brought success and given our pupils a really enjoyable experience: they read a lot of Latin as independently as possible, they enjoy the texts we read, and they leave us equipped with the ability to read on at the highest levels. If you're debating making the switch, I cannot recommend it highly enough. While it is scary to move away from the structure of traditional courses, teaching with CI lets you share classical languages in an accessible way and brings so much joy to the pupils through their success.

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