

In Pursuit of Excellence
A paper on the teaching of the classics

A Parliament Street Policy Paper

by

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with a foreword by Toby Young

Foreword

On the face of it, encouraging children to learn Latin doesn't seem like the solution to Britain's current skills crisis. Why waste valuable curriculum time on a dead language when children could be learning one that's actually spoken? The prominence of Latin in public schools is a manifestation of the gentleman amateur tradition whereby esoteric subjects are preferred to anything that's of practical use. Surely, that's one of the causes of the crisis in the first place?

But dig a little deeper and you'll find plenty of evidence that this particular dead language is precisely what today's young people need if they're going to excel in the contemporary world.

Let's start with Latin's reputation as an elitist subject. While it's true that 60% of independent schools offer Latin compared with only 13% of state schools, more children are studying Latin in the state sector than in the independent sector. In any event, the fact that Latin is still widely taught in private schools is hardly a reason not to teach it in comprehensives. According to the OECD, our private schools are among the best in the world, whereas our state schools are ranked 23rd. And that number flatters the state sector because it includes grammar schools where Latin is still a core part of the curriculum. Strip those out and our state schools would drop even further in the international league tables.

Hard as it may be to believe, one of the things that gives children at independent and grammar schools the edge is their knowledge of Latin. I don't just mean in the obvious senses – their grasp of basic grammar and syntax, their understanding of the ways in which our world is underpinned by the classical world, their ability to read Latin inscriptions. I mean there is actually a substantial body of evidence that children who study Latin outperform their peers when it comes to reading, reading comprehension and vocabulary, as well as higher order thinking such as computation, concepts and problem solving. That remains true even if you control for things like gender, ability, socio-economic background, etc.

This is the reason Latin is compulsory at the West London Free School (WLFS), which I co-founded in 2011. Critics of the school believe it's because we want to discourage less able children from applying, but it's another common misconception to think Latin is especially hard. In fact, it's no more difficult than Maths. No school would dream of not teaching Maths to pupils in the bottom half of the ability spectrum. Why shouldn't they be taught Latin as well? Our experience at the WLFS is that children of all abilities are capable of learning – and enjoying – Latin.

The sheer joy of studying Latin is something emphasised by Llewelyn Morgan, an Oxford Classicist and co-author of a recent Politeia pamphlet praising the teaching of Latin in state primary schools. “Latin is the maths of the Humanities,” he says. “But Latin also has something that mathematics does not and that is the history and mythology of the ancient world. Latin is maths with goddesses, gladiators and flying horses, or flying children.”

No doubt some people will persist in questioning the usefulness of learning a dead language. For these skeptics I have a two-word answer: Mark Zuckerberg. The 28-year-old founder of Facebook studied Classics at Philips Exeter Academy and listed Latin as one of the languages he spoke on his Harvard application. So keen is he on the subject, he once quoted lines from the Aeneid during a Facebook product conference and now regards Latin as one of the keys to his success. Just how successful is he? According to the Chicago Tribune, he’s worth \$10.2 billion. If that isn’t a useful skill, I don’t know what is.

Toby Young, co-founder of the West London Free School

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In this paper I will examine the current state of Classics in British schools and how this connects with the subject as taught at university. I will argue that the existing state of affairs is far from perfect and suggest ways in which this may be remedied. The experience drawn on will be that of teaching the subject in the independent sector for 25 years and at Oxford University for 10 of those years, and continuing. As such, my remarks will apply to the traditional form of the subject, namely the learning of Latin and Greek with a view to reading texts and evaluating their qualities in the original languages.

1. What is the state of Classics in schools today and what was it previously?

Classics as an academic subject has lost much of its intellectual force in recent years. This is true not only of schools but also, inevitably, of universities, which are increasingly required to adapt to the lowering of standards. A generation ago and from its earliest days, a first-class university degree in Classics was regarded as an outstanding achievement, incorporating as it did the rigorous mental training of a mathematics degree with the humanist disciplines of history, philosophy and literature. Employers knew that such a person had a first-class mind capable of assimilating complex ideas and expressing these with clarity and elegance. He or she would be capable of rising to most mental challenges, having read a wide range of challenging texts in Latin and Greek, and so was supremely employable. The minds that underpinned Bletchley Park proved conclusively the value of this traditional training in Classics. Not least among the benefits of such a classical training was the ability it conferred to read with understanding and enjoyment English literature written before 1900, especially poets such as Shakespeare, Milton and Keats, the incomparable birthright of all young people in Britain but increasingly under fire as difficult and irrelevant to the modern age.

Classics had a simple enough value according to Harold Macmillan: “You knew when a man was talking rot”.

Today in schools, prep and secondary, where once it was normal to provide pupils with a sound linguistic basis for their studies, the subject is everywhere taught through the medium of “readers” such as *The Cambridge Latin Course*, easily the most widely used course as a preparation for GCSE and A-level.* The rationale behind this “modernist” approach to the teaching of Classics was that the traditional emphasis on language-learning before reading texts was alienating modern pupils, who were comparing their Classics lessons unfavourably with the experience of learning French or Spanish or Italian.

In modernist courses such as the *CLC*, there is (deliberately) no systematic learning of grammar or syntax, and emphasis is laid on fast reading of a dramatic continuous story in made-up Latin which gives scope for looking at aspects of ancient life. The principle of osmosis underlying this approach, whereby children will learn linguistic forms by constant exposure to them, aroused scepticism among many teachers and has been thoroughly discredited by experts in linguistics. Grammar and syntax learned in this piecemeal fashion give pupils no sense of structure and, crucially, deny them practice in logical analysis, a fundamental skill provided by Classics.

In defence of this approach it was argued at the time that Classics had to compete with courses in Modern Languages and make more of an appeal to young people. The solution lay in dismantling the existing A-level system, based on the attainment of pupils at O-level, to ease the transition from GCSE to the last two years prior to university.

Previously teachers could assume in A-level students a fair grasp of the language and how it worked. This meant that no formal exams were sat at the end of the first year of A-level. Instead pupils were introduced to a wide range of authors and given a sense of the scope of the subject. By Christmas few were not thoroughly convinced they had made a good decision and (crucially) their reading was enjoyable because their linguistic knowledge gave them the confidence and ability to meet ancient authors, especially poets, on their own terms, In their final year they studied two or three set texts in depth and were examined thoroughly in these, reading them from first line to last in the original language, learning how to evaluate literature through criticism and, if they chose, studying ancient history in tandem, reading primary sources in the original language, and regularly writing essays, in which they acquired the skills of marshalling facts logically and producing arguments.

* In recent years attempts have been made to produce school text-books of a more traditional nature but, while this is admirable, there is no evidence that the language skills of first-year university students are significantly improved.

In addition pupils were introduced to prose-composition from the beginning of their last two years, turning passages of continuous English into Latin and Greek, based on their experience of writing a simpler form of this at O-level. In consequence all gained in confidence and appreciation of the language and some attained a high standard. We know that this exercise formed part of the curriculum at Stratford when Shakespeare was a boy.

Contrast with this the current situation, where we have, in GCSE, an exam that insults the intelligence of all but a few of the pupils who make up the independent sector. Recent changes to this exam have by general consent among teachers made the papers even easier. As it is natural for young people in this information age independently to find out at once what the exam syllabus requires them to know, it is no surprise that this amount of knowledge, and only this, is what they are prepared to learn, however inspired and inspiring their teacher is. The majority of Classics students are to be found in independent schools and there is no question that they are capable of and deserve a far greater challenge than the one currently on offer.

In the AS exam currently taken at the end of the first year of A-level, in comparison with what was previously the educational experience, students study two small passages of literature, which represent barely a third of an original text. They are asked questions so straightforward as to verge on the banal and the emphasis is on following a prescribed technique of answering, as at GCSE. Imagination and independent thought are simply squeezed out of this process as teachers practise exam-answering technique in accordance with the narrow criteria imposed on examiners.

For language they are required to translate a short passage of Latin or Greek prose into English, having learned a specified list of words in advance and at the same time having the benefit of several words whose meaning is given below the passage. The level of difficulty is not substantially higher than that of GCSE, and yet this is the exam whose grades and marks are consulted by the universities when they are trying to determine the ability of candidates. As so many students achieve an A* grade, it is no surprise that considerable importance is now attached to the interview. Having learned the translation of these bite-sized chunks of literature with little awareness of their context or the wider picture (as at GCSE, it is increasingly the case that pupils are incapable of working out the Latin/Greek text for themselves, and so lean heavily on a supplied translation), they approach the university interview with little or no ability to think “outside the box”. Dons at Oxford and Cambridge regularly encounter a lack of independent thought and a tendency to fall back on generalisations that betray insufficient background reading or even basic curiosity about the subject. This need not be the case and is clearly the product of setting the bar too low for these young people at school.

At A2, the name for what was formerly the A-level exam, students read *less than a third* of a literary text they would formerly have read *in its entirety*.

At AS they are required to answer questions that make insufficient demands on their intelligence and imagination. This has a detrimental effect on teachers who find it hard to push the boundaries with pupils who have busy lives and expect instant solutions to problems rather than having to engage in a process of analysis. Consequently, too many teachers resign themselves to teaching purely to the syllabus, despite the potential of the young people in front of them. There is the added problem that young teachers entering the profession are themselves products of the modernist approach and so not wholly in command of the classical languages themselves. As a result they welcome the fact that they are not required by the present system to give their pupils a thorough grounding in the language, embracing the less rigorous approach of modern course-books with some relief.

2. What is the effect of this on Classics as a university subject?

The inevitable consequence is that of pouring water into wine. In the majority of British universities Classics in its traditional form has either disappeared altogether or has been replaced by a course which presents the literature, history and philosophy mainly (or entirely) in translation, i.e. less a degree course in Classics than in Classical Civilisation. At Oxford recently an unhappy don told me how students had turned up for one of his literature tutorials with a translation of the text being studied rather than the text itself. While there is obviously value in studying Greek tragedy or Roman elegy in English, there is no doubt that this does away with all the rigour that underpinned traditional Classics and gave it real intellectual worth. In the case of poetry, especially, this causes students to see, at best, through a glass darkly. It is tantamount to giving them a black and white photograph of a Rubens painting.

This situation has been forced upon university departments of Classics by the impoverished language skills of young people coming up from schools to study the subject. It is not only the classical languages but English itself which has suffered in this way in the last few decades. Every university teacher of the classical languages knows that he cannot assume familiarity with the grammar and syntax of English itself, and that he will have to teach from scratch such concepts as an indirect object, punctuation or how a participle differs from a gerund.

It is true throughout Britain that, as at school, less is being studied at university. Even at Oxford cuts have been made to the number of texts students are required to read and, in those texts that remain, not as many lines are prescribed for reading in the original Latin or Greek. There is a growing awareness among dons that many students are relying excessively on translations downloaded from the internet, and are even accessing essays already written on aspects of their subject. Both at Oxford and Cambridge schemes have been put in place to accommodate the full range of ability that now comes their way. These are to be applauded in the case of students coming from schools where there was little provision for the teaching of the classical languages but there has to be a question mark over such linguistic bridge-building being necessary or desirable for the majority who come from private schools.

At present all first-year students of Classics at Oxford, whatever their provenance, are required to attend classes in Latin and Greek language once a week to instruct them in basic grammar and syntax. These are intended to enable them to make the transition to prose composition without difficulty and to enable them to read literary texts with fluency and understanding. In both aims these classes fail and the evidence is clear that the requisite linguistic knowledge is simply not in place at the start of the third term.

There are various reasons for this. The classes are mainly conducted by post-graduate students who often lack a proper grounding in the languages and few of whom have proper teaching skills. Not unreasonably, dons feel that teaching first-year students basic grammar is beneath their dignity and blame schools for not making sure their pupils know the language. It is a fact well known to all teachers that the later grammar and syntax are taught in any language, our own included, the less receptive pupils will be. Students at Oxford who know they should possess this knowledge already approach these classes with some reluctance and often they emerge from the experience none the wiser. Little real pressure is put on first-year students to remedy the state of their linguistic knowledge, as there is a perception among dons that they are now adults, and the students themselves are aware of the availability of all sort of aids via the internet, which will enable them to paper over the cracks and survive.

In the last ten years of teaching for Mods at an Oxford college with a famous history in Classics I have been struck by how the first-year students who come my way at the start of the summer term appear to know less about the classical languages each year, an experience I know to be shared by dons at other colleges. In some cases this is excusable, given their background at school combined with the sticking-plaster nature of the first two terms of language work at Oxford, but there seems little excuse for the majority who have come through Common Entrance/GCSE/AS and A2 Classics at schools with long traditions in the subject. This is where the problem lies.

3. What can be done to improve matters?

It seems reasonable to assume that universities should be given every chance to promote excellence and that their success in achieving this will be of benefit to the whole country. It is therefore to the schools and to the way Classics is taught there that we should look for a solution or we shall be putting the cart before the horse. In what follows my remarks will apply primarily to the independent schools, where my experience and that of colleagues confirms that there is a calibre of pupil capable of achieving excellence, if taught in the appropriate manner.

When I asked Classics dons at Oxford and Cambridge what they would like to see as a basic skill in prospective students coming up to university to study their subject, the majority gave me the same reply: a secure grasp of the principles of Latin and Greek grammar and a working knowledge of the syntax.

Of course, as interviews increasingly show, they look also for imagination, a logical mind and the ability to think laterally, but the general view is that with the languages in place anything is possible for a young person of curiosity and commitment.

It should not be beyond the wit of schools to provide this, as they did in the past, but first they need freedom to challenge their pupils. This means that inappropriate exams like GCSE and AS must be replaced by something altogether more rigorous and demanding. It is good that, unlike Modern Languages GCSE, Classics GCSE requires pupils to read some real literature but we need to create a situation where they do not simply learn a version supplied by their teacher but are in a position to read the Greek or Latin for themselves (with some help) and to realise how much they would be missing if an author like Virgil existed only in translation.

This can only happen if, from their first lessons at school, they are required to learn the languages gradually in a systematic way, being introduced to the grammar in relation to English grammar and being encouraged to write as well as to translate Latin and Greek. In the past at traditional schools it was not uncommon for children to have the same teacher for English and Latin in their early years, and there is much to be said for this, given the apparent reluctance of so many English teachers to teach their own language. It is perfectly possible to teach the languages in a structured, logical way without sacrificing the social life and history of the Greeks and Romans.

GCSE should be replaced by a modern version of the O-level that stretches pupils and does not hamstring them as at present. This would make the present AS exam completely unsuitable, and either a more challenging set of papers should be devised, if the universities wish to continue with pre A-level interviewing, or there should be a return to an unexamined year of wide reading before the specialisation of the last year.

Although the present exam, A2, has more to recommend it than AS, it also would no longer be fit for purpose and would need strengthening. As part of both final years there should be regular practice in the writing of essays, a skill that has been largely lost in recent years because of the exam system and is (rightly) much missed by dons.

This is not the place for a detailed account of the syllabus that each of these new exams would have, and such matters would best be discussed by a suitably qualified panel, with university teachers having appropriate representation.

Aristotle wrote that excellence should become a habit. For political reasons we have lost sight of the need to achieve excellence in education and to make young people regard it as a way of life. In fairness to them, and in the national interest, it is high time we put matters right.

John Davie

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