

# SATIPS

Support and training in Prep, Primary and Senior Schools

Classics

Teaching Latin and Greek affords us all many and varied pleasures. For me, the joy of marking wild mistranslations remains the highlight – “Scipio ordered the women to display their booty in the forum”, “This time the young man wanted to be the slave-girl” and “The soldier was accustomed to arouse men with his trumpet” have all passed my desk, their double meanings (apparently) unnoticed – but we could all doubtless list many other appealing qualities of our profession. There is however a catalogue of familiar frustrations and complaints which surface at conferences and in private conversation. It is to these that I have decided to devote attention in this edition, and I enclose herewith three pieces from a novice, a more experienced hand and a veteran respectively. I should be delighted to receive comments and responses to these articles, as I intend to turn the next edition of the broadsheet over to some possible solutions. I trust that these materials will prove of interest and wish you all the very best for the new academic year.

## Challenges.

The challenges facing teachers of Classics today. The challenges facing new teachers today. What about the challenges facing new teachers of Classics today?

The past year as a teacher of Classics has been a challenge in many ways; primarily, perhaps, the expectation on me to have a ‘second string to my bow’ - a Classics teaching post is all too often only a part time position (due to the second challenge I will discuss, a lack of teaching time). That means, in order to secure a full time position, I have had to combine teaching Classics with teaching other subjects as well- this year it was History, RS, Reasoning and English. Changing mindsets, teaching styles and classrooms is doable, though exhausting in the long term.

The second challenge is the lack of space given to the subject in the timetable. This is understandable, as mastery of the three R’s is, of course, paramount, but expectations of what can be achieved in one hour a week in a mixed ability classroom, where you might have students from Level 1 to scholarship, need to be reassessed. Yet the lack of timetable space has in some respects been a blessing, as it means there is only so much preparation I can do for each lesson, and it is the sourcing and creating of resources which takes

so much time for a new teacher such as myself. Classics is, possibly, one of the subjects which has the least resources available to it. For example on the TES there are very few resources, compared with other subjects such as History.

The third and final challenge has been to convince parents and pupils of the worth of the ‘dead’ language. At my school, Latin is compulsory in Years 5 and 6, and then in Years 7 and 8 the choice is made between Latin and Spanish, depending upon aptitude and future school choice. The numbers choosing Latin seem to have been consistently lower than those choosing Spanish. The arguments that it promotes logical thought, links with modern foreign languages and English, and is a cornerstone of our Western culture seem to hold less sway than they once did.

Are there solutions to these challenges? There must be. More research into the contemporary usefulness of Classics, pleading with the head of curriculum about timetabling and increased resilience as I become a more established teacher will, I hope, help me to deal with the pressures of teaching a range of ages and a range of subjects, in a range of locations.

**Helen Ronan, Amesbury School**

Since becoming a teacher, I have thoroughly enjoyed working at prep schools. The children are energetic and generally full of enthusiasm to learn. The classical world is fascinating, especially at that age, and the children are always keen when starting Latin at school to learn more about the mythology and history of Ancient Greece and Rome. This is why I feel that is such a shame that the Common Entrance Classics syllabus is so grammatically demanding.

Do not get me wrong, I understand the importance of having a firm grounding in grammar for any student of Latin and Greek, but I am sure that I am not alone in witnessing the children’s enthusiasm deteriorating through the school year. Whilst ISEB might argue that there is plenty of scope to incorporate mythology and history into their syllabus, the allotted time in the school timetable simply does not allow you to do this while also fully preparing the children to pass their exam. And let’s face it, the passing of their Common Entrance examination is the only thing that the school and parents care about.

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At a time when mental health is a key concern for all schools, a lot of the higher level grammar is above the age range for a majority of the children and it has the potential to raise their stress levels. This could be easily be counteracted by slightly lowering the expectations of the syllabus and in turn adding in more cultural aspects. Feedback from senior schools has shown that in the first few years the children are re-taught the majority of the higher level grammar.

Scholarship is always a tricky topic of conversation. As we all know, it is not always up to the school to decide which children undertake these extremely challenging examinations. This has the unfortunate side effect of children who do not have the ability sitting the exams all the same. This is also related to the issue of added stress and mental health.

The final issue that I would like to mention is that of the English Common Entrance syllabus as I feel it is linked to the teaching of Latin and Greek. While it is important to study poetry and creative writing, I firmly believe that there is a lack of understanding of basic English grammar. As a result, I end up having to teach the children the English grammar before I can move on to that of the Latin or Greek. If this were addressed in the English syllabus then I feel that the children would grasp the Latin a lot faster.

If we can capture their enthusiasm for the classical world at this age, instead of only hammering them with grammar, then they will be more likely to maintain an interest in Classics.

## Anonymous

### On the Value of Studying Grammar and the Difficulty of Teaching Latin

On the morning of the last day of the summer term 2017 I was sitting in the Common Room taking a little rest before the final onslaught of Prize Giving and other such joys when I got to talking with a colleague of mine about Year 6 SATs. What a terrible thing it was, went the conversation, that state schools had to do these horrible and boring exams: they have little, if any, educational value and “I mean who needs to know about adverbial clauses and all that grammar stuff anyway” was my colleague’s rather cutting comment on the issue. It was at this point that the bell went and I had to get up and carry on with my end of term duties. But, as I went about my business, I couldn’t help but wonder whether my colleague might be right about the futility of SATs being done in state schools. In the end, I decided that I couldn’t really form an opinion as I know so little about the issue.

However, one thing I was certain of was this: my colleague was absolutely wrong in expressing the view that the study of grammar in Year 6 is a

futile exercise. Of course, as a prep school teacher of Latin and Greek (subjects rich in grammatical content), you would expect me to value the study of grammar, but let me try and explain precisely why I do so.

Let me start by defining what is meant by grammar. In broad terms we can say that grammar is a system of rules which prescribe how words come together to form sentences that have meaning. As native speakers of a language, we have an unconscious knowledge of a language’s grammar. Let’s take the following sentence:

- David is learning the Latin language.

Any native speaker of English knows immediately what this sentence (i) means, just as he or she knows that the following sentence (ii), though it contains exactly the same words as sentence (i), is gibberish:

- Latin learns David is language the.

Clearly sentence (ii) is ungrammatical and as speakers of English we know this instinctively and unconsciously. To be a speaker of English is to know unconsciously the grammar of English, the rules that allow us to combine words into meaningful sentences. So – and this is my colleague’s point (sort of) – if we know the grammar already, why do we need to learn it? Why does a Year 6 pupil doing SATs need to know what an “adverbial relative clause” might be? Year 6 pupils can use an adverbial relative clause quite correctly – they don’t need to be able to name it as well! Yes, admittedly this grammatical knowledge is unconscious and instinctive, but it is a knowledge that serves native speakers of English well. Surely we don’t need to burden ourselves with such grammatical terminology?

In order to begin to deal with this point (and it’s a point, I think, that comes up all the time in one form or another), let us consider Biology and the workings of the human body. As a human being I, in a certain sense, know how a heart works and how a pair of lungs work. I know this by virtue of the fact that I am a human being; because, if I didn’t have all this knowledge of how my body operates, I wouldn’t be here. If my brain did not send messages to the various organs of my body and tell them what to do and if these same organs did not give feedback to my brain about what is going on, then quite simply I’d be dead! Of course, the knowledge I have of my body’s functions is unconscious and internal. If I want to get an articulate and conscious knowledge of my bodily organs, then I need to study the science of Biology.

The science of Biology will enable me to acquire a knowledge of the body’s operations that is external and formal. In the same way, by studying grammar, I can externalize and formalize and

make conscious my unconscious and instinctive knowledge of my native language. My linguistic knowledge thus becomes scientific. The study of grammar, commonly known as Linguistics, aspires to be a science. Indeed, since at least the 1950s, when the line of argument I am following was, I believe, first put forward, the point has been made that language is species specific.

All human languages have a common structure and have nothing in common with the methods that other animals (e.g. bees and dolphins) use to communicate. So in studying grammar and the structure of language, we are studying a distinctly human trait, an aspect of the human mind/brain. Indeed, the study of grammar or Linguistics is a sub-field of Psychology and Cognitive Science.

For this reason it is appropriate that our Year 6 pupils study language and how it works, just as it is appropriate that they study Biology and how the body works. It is part of having a decent education and is in a certain sense, like most subjects in the school curriculum, an end in itself.

To say, however, that a subject in the school curriculum is an end in itself is not to deny that there are not tangible benefits and spin-offs. Just as the study of Biology can lead to careers in such fields as health care and sports coaching, so too can the study of grammar confer practical advantages. One of them is that it helps us learn a foreign language. If we have a conscious knowledge of the different words in our own language and how they relate to each other, it is far easier and quicker to learn a foreign language. We can use the conscious knowledge that we have of our own language to help us get a conscious knowledge of the foreign language we are trying to learn.

The study of grammar also helps us to communicate more effectively, especially when we are using written language. Language is, of course, a natural thing and is as old as the human species. But written language is a relatively new development in human history and it is most certainly a human construct. It was the Greeks that invented the alphabet and with that the capacity to keep a record of spoken language and produce lengthy written discourse. A knowledge of grammar can help us eliminate many of the ambiguities and misunderstandings which result from poorly constructed passages of written prose. The ambiguities of Truss's "the panda eats shoots and leaves" or Shakespeare's "go get him surgeons" can only be fully appreciated and explained by employing conscious grammatical knowledge. Sometimes it can literally be a matter of life and death. In 1854 during the Crimean war, when the Russians attacked the British base at Balaklava, a misunderstood order led the Light Brigade to charge to their deaths in one of the most infamous of military disasters. Perhaps it is too fanciful to

claim that grammar can save lives, but I am going to try!

To advocate, as I am doing, the teaching of grammar in prep schools leads onto the question of how best to do it. For good or ill, the main vehicle by which prep school pupils acquire their knowledge of grammar is through the study of Latin. It is difficult to teach Latin in prep schools. It is difficult to teach to classes of mixed ability a subject which in its complexity is as hard as anything on the curriculum and for which so few lessons are allocated. Sometimes as a Latin teacher it feels like you are expected to be an alchemist. So how do you do it, or at least try to do it?

I think it is a mistake to try and cover too much ground. In the ISEB syllabus, we, thankfully, have four levels and it is not always productive to try and cram all this knowledge into all the pupils in a particular class. Rather it's sometimes better to allow pupils to reach a standard commensurate with their ability and the time available. Yes, we are bound by the pressure of preparation for exams (and when it comes to scholarship exams that pressure is quite intense), but I always try to remember the trite but true adage that education is not about filling an empty vessel, it's not about teachers transferring knowledge from themselves to their pupils. Rather, as teachers, "we should see ourselves more like horticulturists charged with the care of a garden. We need to provide the optimum conditions (sunlight, water, fertilizer, the clearing of weeds) in which individual pupils can thrive for themselves and of their own accord, developing at their own pace to their full glory in all its uniqueness, whilst at the same time respecting the rights and space of others to do the same." By the way, I am quoting from my Departmental handbook – hence the purple prose! However, it's a serious question: how do we motivate pupils to want to learn and want to grow in the way we have described?

Obviously, this is not an easy question to consider and of course I don't claim to have anything like a definitive and comprehensive answer. But I would say that fundamentally we need to present pupils with problems and puzzles that both challenge and interest them: then, once this is done, we need to help them to think through ways of solving these problems and challenges. So in teaching Latin grammar, why not construct a situation where pupils are given the thrill of working things out for themselves rather than being directly told something, which often happens when there is a rush to get through a long syllabus. For example, pupils who have learnt the imperfect "amabas" and the future "amabit" are in a position to work out for themselves the 3rd person of an imperfect like "amabat", even though they might never have come across this form before. Quite simply they use prior knowledge to gain new knowledge – scaffolding

I think it is called in modern eduspeak - and who doesn't get a sense of pleasure and satisfaction from doing something like that? In teaching the use of ne, num and nonne to form questions in Latin, why not first of all teach the class, nay even better, guide the class towards a conscious understanding of the rules for question formation in English? After all, as we have discussed above, our pupils already know these rules unconsciously and what fun it is to find out consciously what you already know unconsciously. You are exploring your unconscious mind. For example, you could spend a whole lesson, maybe even two, working out the rules in English for taking the statement "John loves ice cream" and turning it into the corresponding question, "Does John love ice-cream?" In so doing pupils will have to consider such versions of the original statement as, "John does love ice cream" and "John is loving ice-cream" When you have worked through all these examples from English syntax with a class and worked out the rather complex grammatical rules that English uses to form questions, putting ne on the end of the first word in a Latin sentence becomes a piece of cake, a piece of cake that hopefully the pupils will thoroughly enjoy!

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