The language of the Romans: Designing a resource to support the delivery of Latin at upper primary level in Scotland

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Abstract: Recent decades have seen a decline in the number of Scottish learners presented for National Qualifications in Latin. This has been exacerbated by the absence of any Initial Teacher Education course in Scotland offering Classical subjects as an option for specialisation. The provision of Latin in primary schools has been more difficult to gauge. Latin is included as a Classical Language under the Curriculum for Excellence framework and as a potential L3 option in the Scottish Government's Languages 1 + 2 policy.

Earlier attempts to provide Latin resources and to support their delivery have had success, but this has been limited by the need for ongoing support from subject specialists and by teachers' lack of confidence. In response to this, a new Latin course has been developed which aims to remove some of these barriers. Designed for use with learners in the upper years of primary, it is hoped that this will go some way to position Latin as a more viable option for schools' fulfilment of the L3 language obligation. This article explains the course design and the pedagogical principles underpinning it and examines the importance of context and cultural backdrop in learning the language. It concludes with an evaluation of the piloting of the materials, including a reflection on how the unit might be further enhanced to create a comprehensive resource and appealing addition to the suite of languages offered as part of the BGE curriculum in Scotland.

Introduction

Latin has played a prominent role in Scottish professional, cultural and educational life for centuries. Scotland's national identity has continually intersected with the ancient past, be this in the form of Edinburgh's pretensions as the 'Modern Athens' (Brown, 2022: 55-56), for example, or in the competing interpretations of Tacitus' *Agricola* and the heroic Caledonian antagonist, Calgacus (Montgomery, 2020: 131-48). In the Early Modern period, Latin was recognised as Scotland's third language, alongside Scots and Gaelic. It was widely used both before and after the Reformation and was popular in literary circles even as its general use declined in the eighteenth century (Pons-Sanz & MacCoinnich, 2018; McLean, 2017; Williamson, 1982). In the context of school education, Latin was relatively accessible in Scotland, at least compared to England, owing to the network of parish and grammar schools dotted around the country (Hall & Stead, 2018: 235-38). This was fuelled, in part, by the longstanding requirement of qualification in Latin for entry into higher education, in place until the 1960s.

Since then, however, Latin has undergone considerable decline. Indeed, from the 1980s until the present day, there has been a significant reduction in Latin among state secondaries, with eighty percent of the 2022-23 SQA presentations in Latin (from N3 to Advanced Higher) representing pupils from the independent sector.[1] Even within such a small community, the number of presentations has further declined nationally in 2023-24 (McEnaney 2024). This reality is undoubtedly exacerbated by the fact that none of the centres which currently offer teacher training programmes in Scotland offer Latin or Classical Studies as options for specialisation.

The situation is more difficult to quantify in primary education. According to the most recent survey of local authorities regarding language provision (Scottish Government, 2024), no schools reported offering Latin as the L3 entitlement. Some teachers may offer limited Latin vocabulary in a standalone unit or as part of a unit on the Romans. This obviously cannot be gauged with any accuracy and, even if it does occur, is wholly dependent on the individual teachers' knowledge base. A more formalised approach to teaching Latin as the L3 in primary schools could provide learners with a different sort of language-learning experience through learning a classical rather than a modern language, in the same way that learning a visual-gestural language such as British Sign Language (BSL) (Scottish Universities Insight Institute, 2016) offers a different language experience. Additionally, increased uptake at primary level may, in time, positively impact the numbers presented for Latin national qualifications in the senior phase in schools where Latin is already offered and could establish a demand for it in secondaries where there is currently no provision.

Challenges

There have been a number of challenges facing the successful introduction of Latin into primary schools. The first of these relates to a degree of uncertainty among teachers as to whether Latin is a valid option for the L3 language. As stated in the provisions of its language policy, Language Learning in Scotland: A 1+2 Approach, the L3 can be any language, including Latin (Scottish Government, 2012). Education Scotland, the executive agency of the Scottish Government, however, states that under the language policy arrangements, each child is "entitled to learn a second modern language (known as L3) from P5 onwards" (Education Scotland, 2023). In its specific L3 guidance document (Education Scotland, 2024), it is stated that any language can be taught, but since all resources and references are to modern languages, it is understandable that there has been uncertainty regarding the position of Latin. Within the Classical Languages area of Curriculum for Excellence, moreover, Experiences, Outcomes and Benchmarks are available only for Third and Fourth levels (S1-3), whereas for Modern languages, these have been defined for First to Fourth levels (P2-S3).

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[1] SQA data procured for the 2022-23 session revealed that 471 out of a total 596 entries were from fee-paying schools.

Another difficulty encountered in the introduction of Latin has been the question of who should teach it. Cognisant of the fact that teachers without specialised training in Latin may not feel confident to deliver Latin lessons, in 2018 the charity *Classics for All* supported teachers to deliver a Latin course based on the *Minimus* textbook series (Bell, 1999). This enjoyed some success in Glasgow City and Aberdeenshire primaries, but momentum was difficult to maintain, owing in part to precisely those concerns of teachers regarding their knowledge of Latin and thus their ability to lead classes with confidence. The relative growth of Latin in English primary schools suggests that it is possible for the language to thrive without teachers having extensive previous knowledge of the language (Woolcock, 2023) but it is nevertheless evident that this has constituted a real barrier. Further attempts by university groups, such as the *Literacy through Latin* project at University of Edinburgh, or the Iris Project (http://www.irisproject.org.uk/), have sought to address this issue by providing volunteer Latin teachers to lead lessons (University of Edinburgh, 2023). This has certainly been a more attractive option for schools and has often been effective in the immediate environment of the universities, yet these projects are limited both by geography and by their dependency on volunteer numbers to maintain a long-term engagement.

Primary Latin Unit

It was with this in mind that a new Latin unit was developed, under the aegis of the Classical Association of Scotland, with a view to providing an initial resource which would be accessible both in terms of its content, allowing teachers to use it without the need of extensive support, and its geographical reach, being an online package. It was hoped that through engagement with those trialling the material, we would be in a better position to assess what exactly a Latin L3 resource should look like and how realistic it would be for a class teacher to deliver it with only minimal support.

The explicit aim of this unit, then, was to introduce learners to the language of the ancient Romans, but in such a way that it would remove the barrier of teacher confidence and the need for extensive support or training. For this reason, the emphasis was on Latin vocabulary, rather than the more intensive grammar-based approach traditionally found in the teaching of Latin[2], in the hope that it would require a comparatively minimal level of ongoing support. The introduction of Latin words and the English words, roots and prefixes which derive from them was also intended to highlight links with areas of the literacy curriculum and thereby give the resource a familiarity[3]. Vocabulary was introduced in the context of stories from ancient myth on

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[2] The principle focus of Latin learning has traditionally been grammar-learning and translation. In recent decades, maintaining the emphasis on grammar, a reading approach which teaches the grammar through Latin stories has become more popular and has been exemplified by *The Cambridge Latin Course*, the *Oxford Latin Course* and more recently by the *Suburani* course.

[3] The approach is also similar to the 'Word Roots' sessions offered by Classics for All and developed in the Maximum Classics programme: https://maximumclassics.com/word-roots/

the basis of research that retention of new words is improved when introduced in a narrative context[4] and when it is integrated and contextualised[5]. The narrative content not only links to parts of the National Qualification syllabus for Latin and Classical Studies, but also pairs naturally with a primary level unit on the Olympian deities designed by teachers in collaboration with the Classical Association of Scotland (CAS 2022).

Reflections on the Pilot

The resources were trialled in three schools: two primary schools in South Lanarkshire (P7 classes) and an all-through school in Edinburgh (a composite P7-S2 class). In terms of content, the feedback from teachers was varied, with some feeling that the vocabulary-based activities were too easy, while others thought it would be too challenging to deliver the course without the support of a Latin linguist; some had anticipated that the material would more closely resemble a Modern Language course and contain more extensive exposure to a variety of language features, while others expressed concern about pronunciation of the vocabulary included. There was also a feeling of uncertainty as to where it fitted in with the Experiences and Outcomes for Second level in the Curriculum for Excellence framework. This would suggest that the aim of creating a resource which was accessible for teachers was only partially achieved, since some teachers still found the vocabulary daunting.

Learner feedback suggested that there was an expectation that there would be more varied language content, rather than only vocabulary and derivations, and that they would learn to speak Latin. There was also the desire for more information about the Romans. This would appear to indicate that the aim of producing a resource which was accessible and engaging for learners was likewise only partially achieved, since although the activities were manageable and there were expressions of enjoyment of the myths, it did not meet their expectations either in terms of spoken Latin or a more typical Roman context. Nevertheless, despite the varied and often conflicting responses, there appeared to be an overall consensus among teachers and learners that Latin is something they would be keen to see introduced into their curriculum. This reflects the findings of the local authority survey into L2 and L3 provision that there is an increasing interest in less traditionally taught languages, such as BSL and Scots (Scottish Government, 2024).

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[4] For story as a means of improving memory, see M. Bromley, *The Stories we tell: Using Story to help students remember*, https://www.sec-ed.co.uk/content/best-practice/the-stories-we-tell-using-story-to-help-students-remember/; and Daniel T. Willingham, *The Privileged Status of Story*, https://www.aft.org/ae/summer2004/willingham

[5] Barbara A. Wasik and Charlene Ianonne-Campbell, *Developing Vocabulary Through Purposeful, Strategic Conversations*, (The Reading Teacher, Volume 66, Issue 2, Dec 2012/Jan 2013). https://education.illinoisstate.edu/downloads/casei/Developing%20vocabulary%20through%20purposeful%20strategic%20conversations.pdf

The unit, then, went some way towards making Latin accessible to class teachers but the suggestion would seem to be that a simplified resource which offers only disparate items of vocabulary, while to some extent addressing the issues around teacher delivery, is not a sufficiently extensive or robust language course. Therefore, it is clear that further development and expansion of the material will be required and that it will be crucial to equip teachers to deliver it in a way which does not depend on a watered-down language experience.

In order to meet teacher and learner expectations for learning the Latin language, the language learning will need to go beyond simple items of vocabulary. As part of this, the addition of a spoken element would also appear essential. Simple phrases of greeting, the exchange of personal information and the use of instructions could be incorporated, supported by audio recordings, which, while reflecting something of the style of Modern Language courses, would still represent authentic Latin. Opinion is divided amongst Latin teachers regarding the appropriateness of including spoken Latin.[6] While there are increasing numbers of teachers adopting this communicative method of 'active' or 'living' Latin, particularly in the USA, it is still very much a minority approach. Nevertheless, the opportunity to engage with Latin through spoken interaction would seem essential here to meet learner expectations and could prove an effective pedagogical approach and engagement strategy at primary-school level.

The feedback also highlights a need for measurable Experiences and Outcomes to accompany the resource in line with Curriculum for Excellence. Within the existing framework, classical languages such as Latin have guidance only for the Third and Fourth levels, relating to secondary education (S1-3). The development of Experiences, Outcomes and Benchmarks at Second level would be crucial to support Latin as a viable L3 option from P5. This could be attained by adapting the existing classical languages guidance (relating to Translating texts, Interpretation of texts, Using knowledge about language and Culture and heritage) but would certainly be more effective and attractive by also including some of the Experiences and Outcomes expressed in the modern language guidance and incorporating them under some sort of 'Communication' section. In any event, it will be crucial to clarify where the resource sits within the Broad General Education (BGE) languages curriculum and how it links to outcomes in the upper years of primary language learning, so that teachers can securely deliver a course for which, it would seem, there is increasing interest.

The development of a more linguistic resource along these lines necessarily gives rise again to the issue of teacher skill and confidence, which it was hoped this vocabulary-based unit would circumvent. It is true that this could be mitigated to some degree by including only set phrases which would not require any manipulation of the language and which could ideally be supported with audio-visual materials. In reality, however, it would appear that in order for Latin to be in a position to be genuinely considered as a viable L3 option and for it to be sustainable, any package of resources will need to be accompanied either by the provision of professional development opportunities for class teachers or in the provision of an external qualified Latin teacher.

Regarding the former approach, the opportunity for class teachers to develop their knowledge of this could form part of primary initial teacher education courses and could replicate, for example, the model of courses offered (MA Primary Education with Gaelic) or proposed (MA Primary Education with BSL) at the University of Edinburgh. Queen Margaret University has embedded basic BSL tuition in its ITE provision (Scottish Government, 2021). Professional learning opportunities for teachers would also be essential via online sessions. This is an area where collaboration with the charity *Classics for All* (https://classicsforall.org.uk/) could prove invaluable, as its Scottish network has supported secondary schools across the country to offer Latin and Classical Studies since 2018, and commonly facilitates training programmes of this nature. Both options would equip the class teacher to deliver Latin, this being the most common model of delivery, with 62.7% of L3 learning delivered by the class teacher. Consideration might also be given for the model of live online lessons where a Latin linguist could lead the lesson and collaborate with the class teacher. This approach has proved successful in the delivery of Mandarin, Gaelic and BSL in particular (Scottish Government, 2024). It does, however, depend for its success on initial and sustained funding and institutional support. In this regard, there may be scope for collaboration with museums such as the National Museum of Scotland or the Hunterian Museum in the delivery of such a unit. This would have the added benefit of producing and promoting a Latin resource which offers language learning but in a context which draws attention to the impact of the Romans in Scotland and their influence on Scottish linguistic, cultural and geographical heritage. This more holistic and collaborative approach to Latin provision may be one step towards preventing Latin from disappearing from the state sector entirely. There is a clear sense that pupils from all manner of backgrounds and locations enjoy learning about the ancient world and the language of the Romans. Latin may be a 'dead' language, but its young learners and enthusiasts are keen to breathe life back into it.

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