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Why Latin?

This is by far the question Latin teachers are most frequently asked. Interestingly, however, it is only within the past century that this question has arisen. The fact is that until recent years, most considered Latin a necessary staple of a good education. In the 1700's the University of Georgia, like many of its contemporaries, required of incoming freshmen, "a correct knowledge of Cicero's orations, Vergil, John and the Acts in the Greek New Testament," (LaFleur, 985, p.341) in addition to English Grammar, Geography, and Arithmetic. This is requiring more than the familiar chanting of *amo, amas, amat*. This statement indicates a desire for an intimate understanding of the language and more than a passing familiarity with her greatest writers. Thomas Jefferson, himself a great supporter of quality education in America, wrote to J.W. Eppes in 1787, "In general, I am of opinion, that till the age of about sixteen, we are best employed on languages: Latin, Greek, French, Spanish." As Mr. Jefferson suggested, up until the 1920's Latin was a common course amongst elementary and secondary schools alike, oftentimes a requirement for graduation. However, the times have changed and it seems necessary to defend the virtues of Latin. Unfortunately, these are far too numerous for me to elaborate on here to my liking. So, I will offer the five most common reasons for the teaching of Latin in classical schools.

1. The most commonly regarded benefit is the great improvement in the understanding of the English language. We derive approximately 60% of our English words, and 90% of those words consisting of more than two syllables, from Latin. We adopted many of these such as *animal, honor, status, clamor*, and let's not forget *toga* into our language without any change. In case you may think that these derivatives are all old words adopted centuries ago, don't forget computer (*computo*) and facsimile (*fac + similis*). In coining new words the age of technology has turned to antiquity.

However, it is not only English vocabulary which benefits from the study of Latin but English grammar as well. English grammar, like its vocabulary, can be quite complex in all its variances and exceptions. Latin grammar

is much clearer and more organized. Many students find it easier to learn more complex grammatical concepts in Latin and then apply them to English. As a bumper sticker once read, “Is your English in ruins, take Latin!”

2. If Latin is so helpful to students’ understanding of English, classified as a Germanic language, it only stands to reason that it would be of even greater help to those languages directly derived from Latin. There are five modern languages that call Latin their parent language. These Romance languages are Spanish, French, Italian, Romanian and Portuguese. These languages derive more than 80% of the words which make up their vocabulary from Latin. Their grammatical structure is also much more similar to Latin than English. Consider the number of nations who claim one of these languages as their official tongue: French -27; Spanish – 20; Italian, Portuguese, Romanian – 10. Can we truly call Latin a dead language when her words have spread so vastly across the globe in her descendants?

3. Many are not surprised to learn that Latin significantly increases verbal scores on tests such as the SAT and even GRE exams, scrutinized carefully by prestigious colleges and universities everywhere. It may surprise them, however, that the analytical and problem solving scores, often associated closely with math skills, also increase significantly among Latin students. Because Latin does not depend nearly so much on word order as it does on agreement amongst word endings, it becomes, as I like to call it, a jigsaw puzzle of words. Students must carefully analyze the grammatical components of each word in order to determine the way in which they must fit together in order to create the correct word picture.

I often instruct students to consider the scientific method as they translate sentences. As their skills mature, they will be able to deduce more quickly the meaning of a sentence. However, they must still prove their hypothesis (theoretical translation) by thoroughly analyzing the state of each word and its interaction with the other words in that sentence. It is only by proving their hypothesis through these grammatical facts that their translation can be accepted as “truth”.

4. Another truly wonderful feature of Latin is that it is not merely a means of communication, but a key to unlock the past. Through the writings of Cicero, Caesar, Livy, and others we learn so much about the world of ancient Rome and Greece; a world which has greatly affected our own.

In writing the Constitution a document which determines our government’s structure and powers, John Adams thoroughly scrutinized the writings of Pliny and other ancient historians in order to determine the best

means of governing. He read these great works in their original languages – Latin and Greek. The documents reveal why our government is more like the Republic of Rome than the Democracy of Greece, where our Senate found its title and shape, why we choose to use jurors to determine many court cases. The list of Greco-Roman influences on modern America could go on *ad infinitum*, but must include art, architecture, music, and literature amongst government and politics. The ancient past is not far removed from our modern lives, but instead is quite close and relevant. To quote the great orator Cicero, “Whoever is ignorant of the past remains forever a child.”

5. Perhaps the greatest benefit that Latin affords is the great door it opens into the world of Literature. To be able to read Cicero in his own language is truly to understand his famed rhetorical skill and abilities of persuasion. To read Vergil’s Aeneid as the author penned it is to comprehend fully the poetic battles of mortal men and gods who inspired John Milton’s own epic, Paradise Lost. To read Ovid’s wondrous tales about strange metamorphoses is to find Shakespeare’s muse. Certainly these may all be read in English, but then one misses much of the imagery and beauty which these words possess and which are often lost in translation.

One cannot compare the impression made by the original works of Monet and Renoir to the poster prints in the gift shop. The brush strokes of the artist, careful and attentive details, and hues of color playing or contending with one another are lost upon the beholder. So it is with language. The beauty of each carefully chosen word placed in its proper position is lost to the reader when transferred to the canvas of another language.

Suggested Links:

The Founding Fathers & the Classics

http://www.grecoreport.com/the_founding_fathers_&_the_classics.htm

The Latin Advantage (on academics)

<http://www.bolchazy.com/al/latadv.htm>

Classical Academic Press

www.classicalacademicpress.com