

Is learning Latin beneficial for school pupils?

Evelien Bracke has been looking for answers



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It may have functioned as a *lingua franca* of the Western world for centuries, but during the last hundred years Latin has become increasingly marginalised in UK education because of its status as a so-called dead language. Recently, however, a counter-movement has begun and numbers of primary and secondary schools offering Latin are increasing UK-wide. In 2014, the Department for Education included Latin as a ‘foreign’ language option in the Key Stage 2 curriculum, and approximately 2 per cent of primary and 25 per cent of secondary schools in England now teach it.

In 2014, I therefore decided to investigate why Latin might be a useful subject for UK pupils to study. With the help of a British Academy grant and my research assistant, Ceri Bradshaw, I reviewed the existing evidence, and tested reading and writing skills of 200 pupils before and after Latin learning. The findings of this project contradict still persistent negative perceptions of Latin as impractical and tedious, and pose urgent questions for policy-makers.

Existing evidence

The quantitative data we gathered from the last century strongly indicates the positive effect of Latin learning on literacy skills, at primary even more than at secondary school level. Findings suggest, however, that studying Latin *per se* is not sufficient for pupils to make linguistic and global progress. Particularly at primary school, a playful, age-appropriate approach to language learning – through storytelling and activities, with language and culture inextricably linked – is required in order to

promote literacy developments. For this approach engages pupils of all abilities, while the traditional grammar-based approach favours the linguistically gifted. One reason that learning Latin can help pupils improve English skills is that English is a language with a low-level connection between pronunciation and spelling, while Latin has what is called a high grapheme-phoneme correspondence. Therefore, playfully engaging with linguistic roots, for example – such as different meanings of the prefix *in* in *in-creasing*, *in-stant*, and *im-practical* – gives pupils a clearer understanding of English linguistic structures.

Quality of life also features largely in studies from the past century. Juxtaposing ancient Roman with modern contexts allows pupils to gain insight into their own and other cultures. Consequently, increased global awareness is a common qualitative improvement attributable to the study of Latin, particularly among pupils in economically deprived areas.

The existing evidence is significant. However, 45 of the 46 studies we examined were from the United States (and the final study was German). Therefore, I set out to test to what extent these findings are transferrable to the UK.

A UK study

As this was a small-scale pilot project, we explored to what extent learning Latin improves reading and writing skills and expands the cultural horizons of primary school pupils. We tested 200 school pupils throughout the UK, using quantitative tests before and after one year of Latin instruction, and a qualitative end-of-year survey. All schools involved teach Latin in a playful way, including activities and storytelling alongside course books.

The quantitative tests revealed that pupils learning Latin mostly outperformed the control group. Latin classes varied from 20 minutes to four hours per week, and initial findings suggest, among other things, that the level of progress made correlates to the amount of Latin learning within one year. A worrying trend we discerned, however, is that girls outperformed boys significantly. This resonates with a trend in UK PISA (Programme for

International Student Assessment) results on reading and writing skills among 15-year-olds, and indicates that more literacy support for boys is required.

The qualitative survey highlighted that, for pupils, the cultural literacy – exploring the historical Roman background in juxtaposition with present UK contexts – was considered of equal importance to the linguistic aspect. For Latin learning to appeal to pupils, it needs to be taught in context rather than with a sole focus on the linguistic element.

This pilot project thus unearthed useful findings which require further exploration. Moreover, in spite of cultural and teaching differences, our current UK study produced findings similar to those of US studies of the past century. A follow-up project concerning the role of teaching approaches to Latin learning is in preparation.

Applying the evidence: a case study from Wales

While there is ample evidence regarding the benefits of Latin when taught age-appropriately, the subject remains under pressure. Since 2011, I have therefore worked on broadening access to Classics (ancient languages and cultures) in South Wales, through activities such as student placements in local schools¹ and summer courses for South Wales communities. On the basis of this experience



Learning the Latin numbers at Ysgol Gyfun Gwyr, one of the schools taking part in the British Academy Schools Language Award project.

and in response to Welsh Government interest in exploring the role of Classics in the curriculum, I set up the Cymru Wales Classics Hub in 2015, to support and promote the teaching and learning of Classics throughout Wales.² Alongside events and CPD activities, we were able to start offering Latin classes at three schools in South Wales for two years thanks to a British Academy Schools Language Award.

As my university projects mainly focus on

primary schools, the BASLA funding increases access to Latin in local secondary schools, which means some continuity can be provided. Teaching is on-going and pupils are particularly enjoying making connections between Latin and modern languages. Demand, however, outstrips supply.

Ultimately, the role of Latin in the curriculum as a potential tool of exclusion or emancipation must be considered by policy-makers, since Latin can play a significant role in benefiting children's literacy skills and global awareness. Latin need not be made compulsory. But increased access must be complemented by the provision of adequate teaching and logistic support to schools, with the aim of raising young people's aspirations, particularly among disenfranchised groups. ■

1. www.literacythroughclassics.weebly.com
2. www.cymruwalesclassicsclub.weebly.com

A new British Academy Special Research Project

To develop a greater understanding of the cognitive benefits of language learning, the British Academy has commissioned a research team at University College London to provide a comprehensive overview of existing research in this area, and its implications for policy and practice.

Although there has been a surge of interest in recent years in the

cognitive benefits of bilingualism, research on the socio-economic and cognitive benefits of language learning has had less attention. As well as reviewing research on the relationship between bilingualism, executive function, literacy, and health, this project will include systematic reviews, analysis and synthesis of such areas as creativity, social and affective cognition, and bilingualism in signed as well as spoken languages, linking bi/multilingualism and language

learning with broader perspectives on cognition including intercultural understanding.

The project is concerned with language learning in relation to cognitive function across the lifespan, including modern and community language education, language skills, employability, community cohesion, and public policy, and explores cross-curricular and cross-societal benefits to individuals and communities.