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Research Article

Roman Numerals in Spanish Primary Education

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Abstract

This article illustrates the importance of teaching Roman numerals, a component of a Latin language programme, as part of a Maths curriculum in a Spanish primary school. The aim is to contextualise the topic with concrete examples, supported by ancient Roman objects such as the milestone. The author discusses the relevance of a more integrated cross-curricular lesson to teach Roman numerals so that students better understand their use and make comparisons between ancient Roman and more modern traditions and culture, and to understand Roman influences on the modern age. Lastly, the author describes a teaching experiment in a Spanish primary school using some *ad hoc* materials to fulfil the aim of the study. The study outlines the positive results of integrating Roman numerals within the Maths lesson and shows that the students gained a richer and more valuable learning experience as they made reference to the concrete objects.

Key words: Primary Education, Latin, Roman Numerals

Introduction

Learning languages allows us to understand a new way of communicating. It allows us to get in touch with a different culture and tradition, but also in a different time. In fact, being able to understand other languages allows us the ability to communicate and understand messages by interacting with other people, but also to brush up on other messages that have been left in the past that often have a very close connection with the present. Latin, for instance, offers us a key for understanding the life of the Romans and also their literature and it continues to be an indispensable element even for Generation 2.0. For these reasons, many schools still offer classical languages and culture courses in their curriculum of study. It could be said that to be a competent citizen of this world we ought to keep pace with changes in technology, and also to be able to look backwards in time. To enable this, education is the most precious gift we can have.

Latin in Spanish Primary Education

Latin in primary Spanish education has seen some introductory studies in the last few years (Regagliolo, 2015; 2016; 2019; 2020a; 2020b) with the aim to create some basic foundations to make the classical languages flourish at an early age. In fact, at the moment, the study of Latin in primary schools in Spain is still being assessed due to the absence of Latin in the primary education curriculum (EMECD, 2013: 97870). Some projects have been run, especially by museums and other organisations, to introduce classical cultural elements, and, together with the studies mentioned above and some conferences, it has been possible to get a taste of this subject, as an introductory study in primary school. However, it has also identified some points that make this first step difficult. Regagliolo's research has underlined that is not an easy task to run and start a Latin course in primary schools in Spain due to the following issues: the lack of autonomy of educational centres, the negative preconceptions about Latin (also see McClelland, 2011), the lack of a specific Postgraduate Teacher Training qualification in Latin didactics in primary education to educate people in this field, and the lack of resources. As the reader may know, in other countries, such as the United Kingdom and the United States of America, Latin and sometimes Ancient Greek can be part of the primary curriculum, and furthermore, the teaching of a classical language in primary education has a longer tradition. For example, the following books are widely available: *Minimus* by Barbara Bell (1999), *Telling Tales in Latin* by Lorna Robinson (2013), and resources by authors such as Rehn (2009), and Larsen and Perrin (2003), or further back in 1991 with *Learning Latin Through Mythology* by Hanlin and Lichtenstein. All have produced valuable materials to use in primary schools in English-speaking countries and different projects to introduce and teach Latin to children. In addition to course books, there are also some innovative and well-known projects such as the *Ascanius Youth Classics Institute*, *The Primary Latin Project* and *The Iris Project* that promote the teaching of Classics with courses, workshops and other activities. Nonetheless, there have also been other extremely important events such as the ones that the Universidade de Lisboa has been offering in the last decade, with summer courses for children focusing on the teaching of classical languages and classical culture. Also, the *Officina Romanorum* 'aims to be an experience that seeks not only to bring participants (preadolescents) into contact with their European culture roots, but also to project and raise awareness of the survival of the Roman world in the contemporary universe'[1]. Nor should we forget the immense work of the *Accademia*

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Vivarium Novum (www.vivariumnovum.net) which, thanks to its founder Luigi Miraglia, has focused on teaching Latin through the direct method and has inspired a lot of students all around the world, as well as the *Schola Aestiva*, the summer school run by the Instytut Filologii Klasycznej UAM which focuses on living Latin. There are many other organisations which provide support, such as the private school in Malta, the Chiswick House School and St Martin's College[2] which, for example, offers a Classical Culture and Civilisation programme. Some experiences in primary education have also been highlighted in *Forward with Classics* (Holmes-Henderson, Hunt & Musié, 2018) and in the website www.classicsforall.org.uk. But, except for some programmes and activities offered by associations and universities, Latin in primary school as a subject included in the curriculum of study is something still unknown for most countries.

Objectives

Considering the Education Curriculum in Spain, with this article we would like to suggest a possible path by way of a teaching proposal in order to make the existing Spanish curriculum more valuable and useful and, to save time and to offer an interdisciplinary subject, aim to make students more aware of classical culture and the Latin language. We will consider Roman numerals as a topic to offer within the Maths programme. In particular, this study highlights the importance of: a) understanding when and how to introduce Roman numerals and how their distribution along the Key Stages in primary education should be planned; b) interacting with a program which has a more interdisciplinary study which provides children with the understanding and the reading of numbers, beyond simple calculation and numerical training, and which contextualises them, so that they understand their use and reflect on this new information more effectively; c) creating a supportive and historical context that has an influence on their lives; d) and finally putting these elements into practice in the classroom.

Latin Through Maths

The teaching of Maths in primary education is fundamental for the learning of all children, but especially in early childhood (Clements, Sarama, & DiBiase, 2004; Copley, 2000). When they start working with numbers, measurements and figures, they are considering the effectiveness they have with different tasks in their lives. Children learn to ask questions about problems, such as numerical quantities. They gradually learn to understand how the various aspects of mathematics work, not only through repetition and memory, but in a reasoned way. This knowledge leads them to 'be numeracy competent because it is linked to the understanding of the mathematical content' (Chamorro, 2003, p. 5). But it does not ignore the importance of the Logical-Mathematical multiple intelligence (Gardner, 1983). One of the innovations of the primary curriculum in Spain (EMECD, 2014: 1989) is the (mandatory) introduction of Roman numerals in Maths, although the curriculum does not specify at what stage they should be studied, or which Roman numerals should be included in the content. In fact, Maths books usually included Roman numerals in the fourth year of primary education[3], when a student is nine years old (indeed, it was already like this with the previous curriculum (LOE, 2006), although the numerals were not mandatory), and they include all the Roman numerals, using different mechanisms for writing and calculation. But the current Royal Decree 126/2014 of February 28 does not set a specific plan for each Key Stage (KS). Instead, it proposes a more general core curriculum of primary education and a more flexible programme without setting the particular period of time in which each subject must be learned (and this not only with Maths). In fact, even though the old decree (EMECD, 2006) was more accurate, it did not include Roman numerals. Consequently, learning Roman numerals could be related to the level of knowledge of Hindu-Arabic numbers (more specifically known as European), in order to study the same numbers, but in Roman script. This also depends on the child's intellectual development and the possibility to acquire a more complete knowledge of the subject. The national curriculum in England, for example, includes the teaching of the Roman numerals in different Key Stages. For example, *'Tell and write the time from an analogue clock, including using Roman numerals from I to XII, and 12-hour and 24-hour clocks'* at Year 3; '*Read Roman numerals to 100 (I to C) and know that over time, the numeral system changed to include the concept of zero and place value*' at Year 4; '*Read Roman numerals to 1000 (M) and recognise years written in Roman numerals*' *at* Year 5 (DfE, 2013, pp. 23–31). The 2013 English National Curriculum for Maths divides the study of Roman numerals into three stages, from eight to eleven years old. This distribution creates a link of continuity that is not offered in Spanish Maths books, where Roman numerals are usually presented in the fourth year, and then they continue with other topics of the subject, when it might be better to introduce other teaching units for more practice. Besides this, the new curriculum in Spain indicates that one of the many goals of Maths in primary education is: '*Read, write and order, using appropriate arguments, different types of numbers (Roman, naturals, fractions and decimals to/till thousand)*' (EMECD, 2014, p. 19389) and, in particular, '*identify Roman numerals, applying the knowledge to understand datings*' (ibid). In fact, most of the books of Maths that we have analysed propose a complete unit for the Roman numerals but tend to focus on their writing and their calculation, leaving aside the entire and fundamental part of understanding the classical tradition. It is important to know and understand the mechanics of formation, but also their context and relationship with the classical world and also with the modern world, which is more familiar to the children. For this reason, the English DfE stresses the importance of '*Roman numerals should aim to be put in its historical context*' (DfE, 2013, p. 124). Roman numerals are an important tool that children can learn and use throughout their education at school and throughout their lives. Therefore, it is important to understand that there is a link between Maths with Latin and the classical world, reflecting not only which Roman numerals to learn, but also to provide an approach to Roman culture and to understand that the Romans have left an immense cultural heritage, that students are in debt to the classical world, and then they can further deepen their study in the following Key Stages. Moreover, they may discover a concrete relationship between Maths and the Latin language despite its absence as a compulsory subject in primary education; the Roman numerals are an example of the content of Latin.

Educational Key Stages

As good practice for teachers and mentors, materials should be adapted to the cognitive development and to the special needs of the children (Cook, Tessier & Klein, 1992) and this should also be taken into consideration in the case of Roman numerals. For example, a 14 year-old child will learn different sorts of skills that are in relation to their cognitive abilities. The same has to be applied for an 8 year-old child. Woodward in a discussion about planning classes and courses (Woodward, 2002, p. 23) defined a series of

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segments (a learned repertoire) that will facilitate the learning of other skills. There are many variables to consider. Overall, we can say that in Year 3 children know how to work with five-digit numbers, to add and to subtract. Therefore, there are no limits dictated by the Maths program to prevent offering Roman numerals with high values such as 1000. But this teaching idea is intended to spread Roman numeral content through more stages, rather than the plan that is already offered by Maths books, and it is designed to provide the potential to create a sequence that allows the students to review and increase interest in future stages, always within an interdisciplinary structure that we provide. It could be a valuable opportunity to offer a change and propose that Roman numerals are taught in different Key Stages. To avoid a casual distribution of the numerals, we want to propose a study in Year 3 based only on numerals ranging from I (one) to XV (15) (more or less as the English content). This is an attempt to introduce the Roman numerals a year earlier but without complicating the students' understanding and without overloading the contents of the curriculum. Through these first 15 numbers children learn some common rules to understand the Roman numerals that will be also essential for learning more numbers in the future.

Cross-curricular study

When speaking of Roman numerals, it is also necessary to know who the Romans were. Roman numerals are not just numbers that were used in a specified period (they are, after all, still used nowadays) but they are also the expression of a written language, Latin, a language that has lasted for centuries and that has given us immense value nowadays. Therefore, both the numerical content – because we are talking about numbers – and the linguistic content – because they are a form of writing and language – are intertwined in an entire cultural context, a requirement that without which the real essence of the language could not be understood and from which it cannot be separated (Liddicoat *et al.*, 2003). Consequently, when explaining the Roman numerals, we ought to introduce Roman culture too. By doing this we contextualise the numbers within a recognisable context. There are several materials and activities to use to introduce the Romans to primary students and for this reason teachers have to bear in mind that there are some topics that can be easily connected and / or integrated with the program in primary education: the myth of Romulus and Remus, the birth of Rome or the characteristics of the Romans (soldiers, gods, architecture, feasts, food, houses, literature, games…). Beside this, in order to introduce Roman numerals, it is appropriate to present them with their real and concrete contexts. In fact, Roman numerals were used in many cases, being part of the whole tradition of inscriptions defined by Susini as '*littérature du rue*' (Susini, 1982, p. 13), because it was a written literature of the street. Inscriptions, whether they are historical, religious, or of other genres, cut, impressed, painted, or written on stone, brick, metal, or other hard surface, are extremely important for today, especially to understand our past. Archaeologists, historians, linguists and anthropologists through these past messages can decipher part of our cultural heritage thanks to their reading and understanding of epigraphy.

Littérature Du Rue

Littérature du rue includes inscriptions which we could easily find in some open places but also in some private houses. Nowadays, lots of this heritage is conserved in different archaeology museums all around the world, where people can appreciate and get a taste of their immense importance and relevance to understand past culture. Nonetheless, some of them are still part of great archaeological sites for protection reasons. Some examples, to simplify where we can find Roman numerals, are Latin inscriptions in public works, commemorative works (arches, columns, altars), sacred structures (monuments, sarcophagi, temples), acts and legislative documents. All of these types of evidence have importance as items of cultural heritage and also for deciphering and discovering new information about the past, but of course each of them had a different role. In fact, talking about inscriptions, they all answer to the diamesic variation, the use of a language with and in a different medium (material support): a different inscription for a different purpose; the diastratic variation, which is connected with the social condition of the people, for instance an inscription written by a not completely literate person could contain mistakes and a different use or a different register of the language; the diaphasic variation in relation with the pragmatic situation; the diachronic variation, associated with time, where we can find different ways of writing Latin according to the years (for example ecclesiastic Latin); and finally the diatopic variety connected to a different location. Roman numerals have been found in lots of inscriptions and we consider that it is fundamental in all of these to introduce the numbers with their true and authentic context without losing their true connection.

The Roman Numerals in Context

For this research we will consider milestones as evidence and contextualisation for Roman numerals. We believe that this type of inscription can help children get close to the Latin language and Roman numerals in a very attractive and modern way. The Romans marked the distance to Rome and other major urban centres through milestones (*milliaria*), cylindrical columns that were placed on the side of Roman roads. These had the function that modern traffic signs have nowadays, and they measured the distance to or from a city using Roman numerals. These columns often also have other data engraved in the stone. The Romans used to record the name of the emperor who was ruling at that time or the governor who commanded the construction of the road on which the milestone was placed. Roman roads were built, basically, for strategic reasons. In addition, Romans also incised the name of the city. Milestones were an important element for geographical positions, but they were also forms of advertising, especially to glorify the efforts of the emperors (or other relevant person of the empire) by incising their name on the stone. In effect, Roman milestones were characterised by three fundamental data: the Emperor / consul or the political person under which the road had been constructed, built, or improved; the city, with the purpose of marking the place where a person was directed to or where they came from; and the *milia passuum* (MP) - the numerical quantity in Roman numerals that identified the steps to the next city or the previous one. Here we suggest an example of an inscription with Roman numerals on a milestone.

Elements as Starting Points

We consider the milestone as one of the examples of inscriptions, useful as a reflection point for primary school children for five important reasons that we are going to present in this section. 1) Through a milestone, students understand one of the uses of Roman numerals in a context and providing specific evidence. As previously explained, the evidence for inscriptions is various and various are the messages and the forms to communicate. For these reasons we suggest that in class the teacher could present some pictures of

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Figure 1. Milestone inscription, Museum D. Diogo de Sousa, Braga inventory n. 66592.

milestones with real inscriptions as above illustrated in *Figure 1* so that children can see with their eyes a direct meaningful object. At this age children need a concrete object and situation to understand fully the elements taught. 2) Through a milestone, children understand how the Roman system for measuring distance worked, working with measures but also studying its components and becoming familiar with some Roman names. Teachers here have also the potential to implement the topic using maps and some concrete objects and talking about the important communication roads (*viae*) used by the Romans. 3) This system also presents a starting point for consideration about the modern traffic signing system on roads that has a similar structure, especially with the use of destination and the use of numbers (usually in kilometres): *Madrid Km 20*. Doing this, it is possible to make comparisons and to understand how a particular system works in different cultures and ages. 4) Milestones offer an approach to understanding the political aspect which can emphasise the role of consuls or emperors but also the administrative functions of the city today as the place where the traffic signs belong. With this, children understand that road communication has something in connection with administrative and political decisions. 5) Last but not least, children have their fingers in the pie and start to get in contact with a classical language. By providing a teaching reflection through Roman numerals and its context, it stimulates the children's thoughts related to past culture and tradition, but also to their position in the present.

Putting the Theory into Practice

We recognise the importance of putting these examples into practice to understand better how to teach and to offer some elements of classical civilisation and also to make some improvements in the field of teaching Latin to children in primary education. To put into practice this experiment, as also outlined in a previous study (Regagliolo, 2016), was not an easy step especially due to the negative preconceptions from teachers and the head of the school about introducing some Latin elements already in primary education.

Methodology

The experiment to teach the Roman numerals took place in a Catholic primary school in the Valencian Community in 2015 together with other experiments that included another primary classroom which focuses on the learning of other Latin language elements. The class was a KS 2 Year 1 (8 year-olds). The experiment lasted for 5 days (45 minutes per day) where the class teacher led the lesson and the author and another Latin linguistic expert, García Irles, were just helping with some instructions and observations during the class. We had the chance to previously meet the main teacher and the director with the aim of explaining the activities and presenting the materials to work with. Both were very open and helpful and especially the main teacher was very active and energetic during the running of the subject. Meanwhile García Irles and I were studying the progress and the results of the experiment. We have to underline that the teacher did not have any Latin language knowledge (he has several years of experience as a primary teacher) but it was not a problem as the level required at this stage is very basic and with the pedagogical knowledge primary teachers have he could run this type of lesson without any problems, especially because the programme was related to Maths. The programme for the material preparation has been funded by the Research Group CODOLVA VIGROB- 145.

Resources

For materials to use in the classroom we prepared three types of resources: 1) A short book about learning how to calculate with Roman numerals with a specific connection (within the texts and problems) with an aspect of Roman culture[4]. 2) Some visual objects to be presented by video and PowerPoint. 3) Game activities in order to make the subject more fun for the children. The short book used in the classroom contains an introduction to Roman numerals with several objects connected with its culture, such as the myth of Romulus and Remus, and some toys used at that time by children, so that every single picture created with the Illustrate Adobe Programme by the author and the photos presented were very well-connected to some aspect of ancient Roman culture. The visual resources, in fact, help children to catch more information as the visual attention and the listening attention are catalysts of information that need be elaborated (Mukerjee & Guha, 2007, cited in Daloiso, 2009, p. 44). The problems created to practise calculations contain references to Roman lifestyle and the Roman milestones and also to current road signs; furthermore, the game to put in practice the numbers includes some resources and objects to build a milestone in the classroom and to count the steps to get to some places within the school. Doing this, children worked on multi-sensory tools, important to get a connection with the world around the child and to stimulate their neurosensorial receptivity (Tosca, 2005 cited in Daloiso, 2009, p. 43). The Roman numerals include numbers I-XV.

Activities

To sum up the activities done with these materials, on Day 1 the teacher introduced the Roman numerals using the booklet, and also read the myth of Romulus and Remus in order to present the creation of Rome according to mythology, and to introduce some visual elements that we reproduced later within the exercises of the subjects. The booklet presents the formation of the numbers from I to XV and a very first calculation with them. On Day 2 children practise again with other exercises with tasks and problems using some visual reference to objects typical of ancient Rome. On Day 3 the teacher presented the milestone, its function and importance at that time and the main part of it. Children have also seen the numeration on the milestone and some real Roman road signs through a PowerPoint. During the third lesson children also discussed the current traffic signs and they commented on the importance they have nowadays. On Day 4 children in small groups created their individual milestone by adding the name of the emperor, the city and the M.P. On the final Day 5 the children created a bigger milestone (with some paper and other tools) and they played by counting how many steps there were from the milestone to other parts of the school. To do this we decided to select some places inside the school (the gym, the theatre, the hall, the bar, the secretary's office…) and present their name in Latin, and in groups they had to calculate how many steps they were from/to the classroom and the place. We also gave some questionnaires to the children and the parents.

Results

In this experiment we had the chance to introduce Roman numerals with a more concrete reference in order to understand the importance of this type of numeration and the relevance of the

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objects (milestones) which support them and were used in ancient Rome. Furthermore, we also wanted to see how children and parents react to this programme so we assigned some questionnaires with open questions (adapted to the age: with pictures and colours for children). From this qualitative questionnaire the results point out the enthusiasm of the children to learn something new and different and to discover new elements of the past culture. The children, after the very first introduction with the Roman numerals and the practical part, really put their fingers in the pie and they acquired not just the importance of using the numerical Latin code, but also they had a lot of fun creating their own materials and playing with them. They were very curious to know more about the Roman culture, about why one of the twins died, or they started asking to translate other words in Latin. Parents were very enthusiastic, optimistic and in favour of introducing Latin and classical culture already in primary education, especially to improve other language skills, to understand the past and to have a more general knowledge of the world.

Conclusions

The study of Roman numerals in primary education in Spain is a subject that opens the doors to different educational proposals and, *in primis,* some reflections on its content and its value as a tool for knowledge, discovery and reasoning. The current educational proposal on Spanish primary education focuses on the mathematical approach, such as translation, interpretation, subtraction, and addition of Roman numerals essential to understanding and deciphering their numerical quantity. But it is an inadequate step to understanding the true meaning of this mathematical system. In fact, the lack of integration of evidence to approach a full understanding of the Roman world can complicate the most valuable learning. For this reason, the teaching of Roman numerals should be offered with a more open and deepened approach about Roman culture where this numeric system was primarily used. Moreover, the didactic reflection on Roman numerals lets us understand through meaningful learning the current context of the traffic signals, so that the learner, aside from learning the numerical system and its real context (in this case the milestones or other aforementioned), can better understand the importance of the past culture to live in today's society. The short experiment to introduce some Latin language knowledge in a Spanish primary school through Roman numerals and a piece of ancient Roman evidence, the milestone and its particular parts, has been positively received by both children and parents. Most importantly students had the opportunity to understand the use of this numerical system in a specific and real context, which is important to get a real reference and a less abstract idea of the use of the numbers. For this reason, this approach to Roman numerals also becomes a link to learning and getting in touch with the Latin language, a valuable path toward acquiring and improving basic linguistic knowledge and understanding.

Notes

1 Officina Romanorum MMXIX: www.letras.ulisboa.pt/pt/agenda/officina-romanorum-mmxix.

2 Chiswick House School: https://chs.edu.mt.

3 The primary education system in Spain lasts for 6 years and it is divided in three stages: KS1 (6–8 years old); KS2 (8–10 years old) and KS3 (10–12 years old).

4 These materials have been published in Regagliolo, A. (2020a).

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