Forum

Comprehending Comprehensible Input (CI): Some Observations

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Abstract

Most people who use the word 'Latin' as the name of a language in antiquity (not Medieval or Neo-Latin therefore) seem unaware that Latin was a continuum made up of many different varieties, Classical Latin (which they identify with Latin) being only one of them. So when they talk of spoken Latin they mean spoken Classical Latin, no other variety from antiquity being available that is suitable to be spoken. This is ironic on two counts. First, the overwhelming majority of native Latin speakers did not speak Classical Latin at all. Secondly, the small minority of people who did speak it did not do so routinely as a language of everyday conversation, but only on certain formal occasions and in certain public situations. They spoke routinely the appropriate form of their first language, the form that was used by a social, cultural and educational elite. This was not Classical Latin, which was not an acquired form of Latin but one that was learned as if it were a second language. What the language they did speak routinely was like we do not know, and no doubt it comprised several different registers, as languages do. Whether they realise it or not, people who engage in informal conversations in formal Classical Latin today are not re-enacting any authentic experience that was to be had in the ancient world.

Key words: Spoken Latin, Classical Latin, First/Second Language, Comprehensible Input, 'Krashen's Theory'

What is spoken Classical Latin for today? Is it just a hobby or a pastime? Can it be used to enable Latin learners to learn to read original texts in Classical Latin more easily, effectively and enjoyably? Can spoken Latin enable students to *acquire* Classical Latin as if it were a first language and to *read* Latin as they read their own language, rather than to translate it? Can it enable people to learn the grammar and syntax of Latin, which they will need to know at some stage? The form of Latin used was not a first language ever and was not 'acquired' as a first language is. It had been developed and elaborated for reading and writing literary, subliterary and official administrative texts, for which the language of conversation was not considered to be appropriate.

Various names have been given to the use of spoken Latin as a pedagogical tool: 'direct method', 'immersive Latin', 'conversational Latin', 'communicative Latin'. The one that is receiving most attention currently is 'Comprehensible Input' ('CI'). This uses spoken Classical Latin extensively, and, like the others, is a way of teaching Classical Latin that eschews the student's native language as a language of instruction. The aim of CI is to reproduce as far as possible the way in which the student acquires their native language, as modern foreign languages are taught. So the native language is dispensed with and the only language the student is exposed to is Classical Latin. Note that this is not the way that a native Latin speaker learned Classical Latin. Classical Latin for a native Latin speaker was based, in the Classical period itself (less so in later periods), on the (highly) educated form of the contemporary Latin that was in use, spoken and written. This fact made it (much)

easier to learn to read and write the Classical form that we call Classical Latin. And clearly this not the case for a student of CI, whose native language is not any form of Latin. The 'input' of CI is made-up spoken or written Classical Latin provided to the student by the teacher for the student to read or listen to. It is Latin that the student will be enabled by various pedagogical strategies to understand and assimilate and respond to. The student gradually 'acquires' a growing facility in the language without having set out to learn the language in the traditional way, in much the same way as the student acquires his/her own native language. The aim is for the student to read Classical Latin as he/she reads their own language, i.e. without having to translate it in order to understand it. Knowledge of the morphology, syntax, phonology, lexis and other formal features of the language will be acquired incidentally by usage, as required, and by direct instruction where necessary.

All well and good so far then. But, if I understand it correctly, students of CI do not actually get to read the originals of most Classical Latin texts. It is acknowledged that these are too difficult for them.[1] What they engage with is more comprehensible input based around these texts composed by the teacher. Is this really a satisfactory goal for a Latin teaching programme? In what way is it an advance on traditional methods if it does not make reading original Latin texts easier? How do CI students fare who study Latin at university? Surely, they have to engage with the original texts?

Using spoken Latin as a language of instruction is nothing new. Quite apart from its use in modern times it, and written learning materials, were used in forms of Classical Latin during the Middle Ages and Renaissance, because of the perceived inadequacy of the contemporary vernacular languages. This situation lasted beyond the Renaissance in fact. So there is nothing new either about

Ørberg's written Latin-only language learning materials, which were the norm for centuries. What may be new is the use to which they are now put, and the principle guiding this use, that 'immersion' in Latin, spoken or written, is the most effective and enjoyable way of enabling the student to read canonical Classical texts. Enjoyable, perhaps. Effective, perhaps not. I think the jury is still out on the latter, and we may have to accept a majority vote in the end.

[The sources of information about CI that I have used are the articles that can be found in the issues of *the Journal of Classics Teaching* from 2019 onwards, in particular the article by Robert Patrick (Patrick 2019).]

What is called 'Krashen's Theory', the foundation for CI, comprises six principles. I conclude this article with a list of seven important points about Classical Latin and its bearing on spoken Latin:

1 Classical Latin (CL) was not a first language (LI)/'mother tongue'.
2 CL at all times, including the Classical period, was learned, not acquired as a L1 is.
3 In the Classical period CL was more similar to the L1 of those who learned CL, whatever this was like — we don't know. One assumes that the L1 was more like CL than 'sub-elite'/'non-standard' Latin.
4 In subsequent periods CL became less and less similar to the L1 of those who learned CL. The L1 changed as 'natural' languages do, but CL remained the same in essentials.
5 The less similar to CL the L1 became, the more difficult it was to learn CL.
6 After Latin ceased to have any native speakers and was nobody's L1, it became even more difficult to learn Latin in the form of Medieval and Neo-Latin. Any spoken Latin was based on the written form.
7 Insofar as CL was always a learned language and not an acquired one, reading Latin always contained an element, greater or smaller, of translation, as it does today. Nobody can claim to read Latin in the full sense of 'read', in the way in which they read their own language.

Note

'The fact is that both Caesar and Virgil wrote at a level that is well beyond what students in high school and even university programs are capable of reading and understanding ... Most of that literature is far too advanced for the students in our classrooms (and if we are honest, for us as well). However, we who teach Latin do have the capacity to take on any of these areas, explore and 'adapt them for our students at a level that they are able to understand' (Patrick, 2019, p. 43). This suggests to me that reading texts in the original is either not a goal for CI or is an unrealised one. The traditional methods enable some students at least to translate the texts if not to read them.

Reference

Patrick R (2019) Comprehensible Input and Krashen's Theory. *The Journal of Classics Teaching* 20, 37–44.