

# Literacy through Latin in Welsh Schools:

## Romanes eunt domus?

Everyone can feel it: there is a change in the air – no longer just a whisper in the trees. Classics is experiencing a renaissance after decades of decline. The Pompeii exhibition at the BM is one of the most popular ever, Roman remains unearthed during excavations nationwide continue to spur interest, and Classics community projects are springing up all over the UK – even the pope and the Mars robot are tweeting in Latin! Little did I know, when I first started a Literacy through Latin project with the Iris Project in one Welsh primary school in November 2011, how rapidly the project would grow. After only two years, twenty of my students at Swansea University are teaching Latin (two ancient Greek) as volunteers to approximately 330 pupils in seven local schools (five primary, two secondary), and the project is about to expand even more in the coming academic year.

The South West Wales Literacy through Latin project is neither unique nor the biggest of its kind, and indeed similar projects are being set up all over the UK. However, the project is the only one of its kind in Wales and – perhaps because of the different social and political context, and its comparatively secluded location – is developing somewhat independently from its Oxford base. While the Iris Project continues to provide support and student training, Swansea is a long way from Oxford, and I have had to look for local funding as well as educational organisations to provide more training. I have also had to explore the local context in order to find a way into a Welsh society which, apart from hubs around important archaeological sites, cares little for the Romans. As the project is moving into its third year and the organisation of the next academic year looms, this is the perfect time to look back and reflect on details of this project that might be different from others.

### **1. Funding and students**

Some projects in the UK receive funding to pay students to teach in schools. It's great when that happens, but it seems unrealistic to think this is viable UK-wide in the long term, especially as more and more schools are clamouring for Latin or Greek teaching.

I'm not a great fan of the word 'employability', but I strongly support the positive side of what it entails: ultimately, our students will need to find a job, and we might as well provide the enthusiastic students with experience in the types of jobs they want to do. So at Swansea University, our students can (among other things) teach as student volunteers. Because I want them to be able to take part in the project while keeping focus on their degree, student volunteers are only required to go into a school one hour every two weeks, and so one group of school pupils (usually between 30 and 40 per class) is taught by two student tutors in alternate weeks. The students work in teams, and need to make an outline

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for the 10 classes they will teach each term as well as individual lesson plans – all materials need to be proofread by myself before they are used in class (and much is available from previous years). To make sure they know what has been taught the previous class, students keep in touch via our Facebook group and Dropbox (where all the resources are uploaded).

The students on the project are usually taught by me, so it's easy to stay in touch and I get regular feedback after class. I am lucky to be surrounded by immensely enthusiastic language students who often go beyond my expectations in creating exciting classes for their pupils – in reality, most of them go into school every week (so they effectively teach in pairs), which helps them get to know pupils and develop constructive working relationships with the teachers. In the pupil questionnaires I collected in June, 100% of the pupils were very happy with their tutor.

Financially, it is thus perfectly viable – and sustainable – to let students work as volunteers. My students are happy to get the work experience (even those that don't want to become teachers). I have also set up a module for those students who want to formalise their experience. These students do teach every week, and take a more proactive role in the project. For this year's assessment, they will be helping me design an MFL-based Latin course, moderate the other volunteers, and redesign our resources website. This is student partnership at its best, and although the number of students taking the module will always remain small (the module doesn't fit well in the degree schemes), feedback so far has been excellent and students say they come away with a lot of information, experience, and feel part of a closely knit team.

Even with a free workforce, you still need funding. I have been lucky to get funding from the Society for Roman Studies, the Society for Hellenic Studies, and the Friends of Classics. However, this was all for resources. For the moment, I aim to keep the project entirely free of charge for school, and so funding is required for student travel costs. Swansea University gives me £500 towards this on a yearly basis, and for the rest I apply for anything that comes up and run fundraising events, the main one being the Ancient Languages in the Park project. This is a summer course in Latin, ancient Greek and Hieroglyphs classes, which takes part in the University park. Anyone can sign up for £3 per class. I usually raise between £250 and £500, and this is used integrally to reimburse student travel costs. In sum, once you have resources and students, this is a relatively cheap project to run.

## **2. Training**

Dr Lorna Robinson (the Director of the Iris Project) comes over every year in January to give a workshop on adapting ancient texts for classroom use. By now, I have also retrained so I can provide guidance on Latin and Greek teaching. The training by CILT Cymru (the National Centre for Languages, <http://www.ciltcymru.org.uk/>) has been invaluable, and Routes into Language (<https://www.routesintolanguages.ac.uk/cymru>) have promised

teacher training this year. For a general outline of class behaviour, I have been lucky to get free student training by the South West Wales Reaching Wider Partnership (a local widening access organisation), and Swansea Metropolitan University provide further training on teaching Latin at primary level. Apart from paying for providers' travel costs (and for Swansea Metropolitan University, their teaching time), much of it continues to be free, and I organise regular workshops for the volunteers.

### **3. Literacy and other outcomes**

When the point of teaching Latin is doubted, two arguments are generally used by proponents: 1) it gives access to the cultures at the beginning of Western civilisation, and 2) it improves literacy. Bizarrely, often the two arguments are seen as mutually exclusive, though that makes little sense in my opinion. In Wales more than in the rest of the UK, literacy is a huge problem, with 20% of pupils going into secondary school now functionally illiterate. There are few studies that actually confirm that Latin improves literacy skills, but based on the questionnaires and feedback I have had from teachers, it is clear that Latin does help make pupils aware of linguistic structures.

The methodology of our classes is thus focused on improving literacy, as that makes most sense in the context. While my students are welcome to use their choice of textbook, we don't use one main course book. Instead, we move – like Modern Foreign Language teaching at primary level – from a basic word level through phrases, sentences and then texts. Focus is first on vocabulary, and moves through the grammar, e.g. subject-direct object differentiation, use of stems and endings, etc. Latin words are connected with English (and Welsh, where students feel confident – and if not, they are encouraged to ask pupils whether they can see connections. Since the teacher has to remain in the classroom and take an active role, they can often help here.) All of this is done through games, puzzles, storytelling, crafts, and drama. We normally work on a theme for one term: generic ones such as seasons, food, family, or stories are easily adaptable and allow for parallels and differences between modern and ancient cultures to be discussed.

We focus on oracy, reading, and writing (parts of the Key Stage 2 curriculum) to a largely equal degree, and the focus of the classes is to make pupils *aware* of language – not to make them fluent readers or speakers (this is again part of the KS2 aim of MFL language acquisition). In reality, though, the pupils usually get a taste for Latin reading and grammar (which is of course our secret aim!), and after 3 terms of teaching, our year 6 group at Brynmill Primary School knew 4 tenses, all the conjugations and 3 declensions, and was able to sit the OCR Entry Level Latin test. It was a huge achievement. (The tricky thing now is, of course, that few secondary schools in the Swansea area offer Latin, even outside of the curriculum.)

It is not my aim to get all of our pupils to sit the OCR exam. I will open this opportunity up to any pupils who would like to try it. As was demonstrated by one pupil

who started crying during the exam, tests put pressure on people, and I wouldn't want this to detract from the enjoyment pupils get from the project.

#### **4. Challenges and developments**

The main challenge is the logistics of the project. As I am the only organiser, I have to make time for the project alongside my teaching and employability/schools liaison role. Arranging timetables for all the schools that fit the student volunteers, getting students DBS-checked, checking their materials on a daily basis, applying for funding, setting up student training, getting retrained myself, trying to keep up with developments elsewhere in the UK and internationally... I'm sure anyone who is organising a similar project knows how time-consuming this is. Most of the schools, students, and pupils are a pleasure to work with, but there are occasional hiccups: uncollaborative teachers, the odd lazy student, financial restraints... Ultimately, however, the project runs fairly smoothly. I find that keeping the students happy is a key ingredient for success: tea, biscuits, and the occasional pint make them feel they are an integral and appreciated part of the project.

The project is further developing this year. We are launching a Latin PenPal project (ideas for names welcome!) with Welsh schools and 170 pupils in North Cobb High School (USA). Year 7 pupils will be communicating about their daily lives and so will get the opportunity to learn more about global citizenship (another KS2 aspect). We are also, as a department, starting up an exciting heritage project with CADW (the Welsh heritage trust) to provide work placements to our non-linguistic Classics students in linking the Roman sites in Wales. Watch this space!

And finally...

Pupil feedback tells us clearly that Latin is being discussed at home, and parents and/or grandparents who learned Latin in school are reengaging with the language as well. Through the younger generation, the whole community is reached, and awareness of *both* the language and the culture is raised. Both pupils and students are made more aware of their linguistic abilities, and students gain valuable work experience. For universities faced (once the REF is over) with a focus on student experience, employability, and community impact, a project such as this ticks many boxes. This is not why I organise this project, but we might as well use the HE agenda where it helps us.

Information about the project can be found here:

<http://www.southwestwalesclassicalassociation.co.uk/resources/UPDATED%20%20letter%20for%20parents-teachers.pdf>. You can stay in updated via the South West Wales Classical Association Facebook page. Anyone who would like to get in touch is welcome to do so at [e.bracke@swansea.ac.uk](mailto:e.bracke@swansea.ac.uk).

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