

Ancient Languages and the Modern Learner: The Effective Use of Digital Resources in the Latin Classroom*

An introduction to the *Cambridge School Classics Project*

The *Cambridge School Classics Project* (hereafter: CSCP) was conceived in 1966 in response to a growing crisis in classics teaching. The project was set up under a joint initiative by the University of Cambridge Faculty of Classics and the Department of Education, funded by the Schools Council and the Nuffield Foundation. Several crises had caused the number of pupils studying Latin in UK schools to dwindle, primarily the removal of the Latin requirement for entry to the most competitive universities in the UK and the increasing conversion of academically segregated schools to a comprehensive system. There was also recognition that the subject had to engage with modern research and pedagogy in order to move forward.¹

Starting from first principles and taking full account of teaching methodology in modern languages, the newly formed project developed a Latin course radically different from previous courses. The new *Cambridge Latin Course* (hereafter: CLC) integrated the study of language and the ancient world by developing pupils' reading skills through a series of stories set firmly in the culture of the 1st century AD. The work of the project would underpin a great many advances in the teaching of classics in the UK, and the CLC is used by more than 80% of schools teaching Latin in the UK today.²

Influenced by the work of Noam Chomsky and Michael Halliday, the course employed a generative grammar approach, with the primary goal of learning to read Latin by reading Latin.³ The current course still follows the basic linguistic scheme, with subsequent revisions to the content and layout of the textbooks and supporting materials made in light of teacher feedback and developments in pedagogy.⁴ It was clear from

* The video of the talk, presented at the online conference *Teaching Classics in the Digital Age* on June 15-16, 2020, is available at <https://doi.org/10.5446/51993>.

1 Forrest 1996, 23-44.

2 *Cambridge School Classics Project* 2008, 82.

3 Wilkins 1969 and 1970.

4 Story 2003, 86-87.

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early on that reading by itself, especially in the amount of time available to the average learner, was not sufficient to generate a useful “passenger grammar”, as described by John Wilkins, which pupils could develop individually and employ to comprehend and ultimately translate Latin text. Standard terminology, such as case names, was inserted. Structured opportunities to explore and retrieve language were created in exercises and supplementary language information, although care was taken to retain the principle of the comprehensible sentence as the core unit of Latin.

The development of digital resources

In preparation for the 4th edition of the textbook in the 1990s, Tony Smith (the project’s digital collaborator and software developer) and the CSCP team developed digital lexicography tools to analyse the stories in the textbook and to track the impact of the changes being made upon the language scheme. The interactive morphological analyser would form the backbone of subsequent resources.⁵

In 1999, in response once more to an ongoing decline in Latin numbers, then Project Director Bob Lister led the development of the *Cambridge Online Latin Project* (hereafter: COLP) to enable students without a specialist Latin teacher to access Latin lessons.⁶ Schools were given support in training supervising staff and promoting lessons to students, who then completed a programme of study online with a class tutor, sending work to be marked via email. A website was created to host materials to develop their learning, share links, and “encourage a sense of community”.⁷ The use of digital materials came with its own challenges, including lack of reliable access both in school and at home, and the limitations of email as a method of communication between students and tutors. Not only was creativity constrained by the format, the lack of educational dialogue was frustrating and demotivating for learner and teacher alike. It was concluded that computers were able to stimulate classroom discussion, they can enable collaborative learning at a distance, but at least at the moment they are most effective when used by an individual. In this role they offer the students the benefits of self-pacing, reinforcement, and an unthreatening environment for learning. Learning a language is a communicative process, and it will almost always be better achieved with the help of, and in the presence of, a skilled teacher.⁸

The distance-learning programme continued to grow, with adult learners requesting access to the materials. An online distance-learning programme for all was rolled out,

5 Lister 2007, 108–109.

6 Lister, Smith 2001.

7 Lister, Smith 2001.

8 Lister, Smith 2001.

designed as an email correspondence course. Funding was swiftly acquired to develop further digital materials, including video dramatisations of the stories. Much of this material is currently available as part of an e-learning DVD, which is being repurposed for online use.

Initial digital content was developed with the individual learner in mind, and as individualised preparation for classroom interaction with a teacher, or for consolidation of language. The first programmes developed were vocabulary testers, and a Latin-endings programme to drill inflectional endings. Also developed was a parsing dictionary to support the development of fluency in reading. The next phase of digital resources saw the development of materials focused on learning activities rather than around testing, and on assisting student reading, with more flexibility over whether tools were to be used individually or within a whole-class setting.⁹

Use of *Cambridge Latin Course* suite of resources in the classroom

The current suite of digital resources is used in a much wider variety of ways than the original materials. While the resources are still frequently used under teacher direction with the whole class, with the near ubiquity of personal digital devices many students are able to access digital resources in school without the need of a dedicated computer lab. Students are becoming used to learning online, and teachers are becoming more confident in managing this modality.

The CLC website is now just one part of a much larger site, incorporating a huge range of resources, including schemes of work for civilisation topics, documentaries on aspects of ancient life, and support for reading authentic literature.¹⁰ There is a bespoke site with separate digital offerings for the North American editions of the course.

Each book has its own set of materials, with an accompanying Teacher's Guide that includes notes on pedagogy and suggested activities (Fig. 1). Each stage, or chapter, is supported by a range of interactive materials designed to help the reading method of learning Latin. This includes external links to cultural information to promote contextual understanding. These resources are free to use, and are arranged under the following headings: The Stories, Practising the Language, and Cultural Background (Fig. 2). This enables free navigation by students and teachers within the stage. For learners and educators looking for a predefined structure to the resources, the textbooks have been issued in a digital format, retaining the same sequencing of activities as found in the print books. This is a combination of a full-colour version of the textbook with an easy-navigation drop-down menu to other stages and links to resources relevant to the pages (Fig. 3).

⁹ Discussed in detail from the learner's perspective by Laserson 2005.

¹⁰ *Cambridge School Classics Project*: Main website. <https://www.cambridgescp.com/> (last accessed March 30, 2021).

Fig. 1: Cambridge Latin Course, Online Activities: Book 1 page.

Each story in the textbook has an Explore the Story interactive explorer (Fig. 4). This is a version of the text that is fully parsed and linked to dictionary definitions for every word. For meaning-based learning to take place, students need knowledge of a minimum of 95% of the vocabulary items.¹¹ Despite there being a feeling among some teachers and students that consulting dictionaries is in itself a worthwhile use of time,¹² the actual learning benefits of this practice are minimal when seen as part of a process in understanding the meaning of a text.¹³ Looking up words in a glossary is time-consuming and can be demoralising. Students lose track of the flow of a narrative, and each word can easily become a disjointed unit rather than part of a meaningful sentence or paragraph. Frequently having to consult the dictionary can also prevent vocabulary-poor students from completing enough reading to understand how the language or cultural material

11 Nation 2001, 147.

12 Laserson 2005, 60–61.

13 Hunt 2016, 109.

Book I, Stage 9 ~ thermae

Book I

- Stage 1 ~ Caesilius
- Stage 2 ~ in ville
- Stage 3 ~ negotium
- Stage 4 ~ in foro
- Stage 5 ~ in theatre
- Stage 6 ~ Felix
- Stage 7 ~ cena
- Stage 8 ~ gladiatores
- Stage 9 ~ thermae**
- Stage 10 ~ rhetor
- Stage 11 ~ candidati
- Stage 12 ~

Verbovis

Book II

Book III

Book IV

Book V

The Romans loved going to the thermae - the public baths - and the Pompeians were no exception. The towns had three baths, and a fourth was under construction! Every day, people went to baths where they could exercise, wash and clean themselves, relax and meet friends. Join Quintus on his birthday, and experience an important, pleasurable part of Roman life.

The Stories

in palaestra Page 116
 Quintus goes to the baths and celebrates his birthday with a bang...and a smash!
[Explore the story](#)

in taberna Page 120
 When it comes to shopping, Metella and Melissa are Pompeii's best! Watch them in action as they descend on the toga store.
[Explore the story](#)

in apodyterio Page 122
 Watch out, watch out, there's a toga-thief about!
[Explore the story](#)

Practising the Language

Activities for vocabulary revision and language practice:
Test your Vocabulary is against the clock and can be set to all words in this stage, up to this stage, etc.

[Test your vocabulary](#)

Sorting Words asks you to sort words by meaning, case, etc.

- [Cases 1](#)
- [Cases 2](#)
- [Cases 3](#)
- [Cases 4](#)
- [I and you](#)
- [Which person? 1](#)
- [Which person? 2](#)
- [Meanings](#)

Practising the Language exercises are digital versions of exercises in the Cambridge Latin Course textbooks.

- [Exercise 1](#)
- [Exercise 2](#)
- [Exercise 3](#)

Cultural Background

Can you help? If you've found a link we could add please email us.

NOTE: These links will appear in a new window. CSCP is not responsible for the content of external sites.

[Stage 9 title-page](#)
 Atrium of the Suburban Baths in Herculaneum.

- [Roman Baths: General](#)
- [Baths of Pompeii](#)
- [Baths of Herculaneum](#)
- [Baths of Rome](#)
- [Baths in the UK](#)
- [More Water, Bathing & Exercise](#)

[Book I Dictionary](#)

[Vocabulary Tester](#)

[Book I Teacher's Guide](#)

Fig. 2: Cambridge Latin Course, Online Activities: Stage 9 page with links to activities and resources.

Fig. 3: Cambridge Latin Course, 'Online Textbook: Stage 9' story page with links to related activities and resources.

is working. The interactive explorers can be used to supplement the student's own personal vocabulary knowledge when needed, and every vocabulary item accessed is collated into a personalised vocabulary session which can then be reviewed after the reading is complete. This supports repeated recall, within a narrative context as well as without, which aids vocabulary retention. This is in contrast to the traditional method of issuing vocabulary lists for testing. Administering formal vocabulary tests encourages students to use strategies to 'perform' on the test, e.g. cramming words into their short-term memory in the minutes before class. Using low-stakes, instant-feedback activities encourages learning during the task. The combination of Explore the Story with a brief vocabulary revision and test ensures that the assessment is rooted in the intended outcome – increased fluency of Latin reading.

By removing some of the performance elements of a traditional classroom, including the need to impress the teacher, interactive resources can also support positive learning habits, risk taking, and creativity. If students are not constantly looking up words in the dictionary, they can concentrate not only on comprehension of the text, but also on the nuances of selecting appropriate words to express the meaning of the text.

The next evolution of these interactive explorers (currently available in North America only) includes additional assistance and learning opportunities: integrated audio of the stories that highlights text as it is played, practise in identifying and using derivations from a range of modern languages, and comprehension activities (Fig. 5).

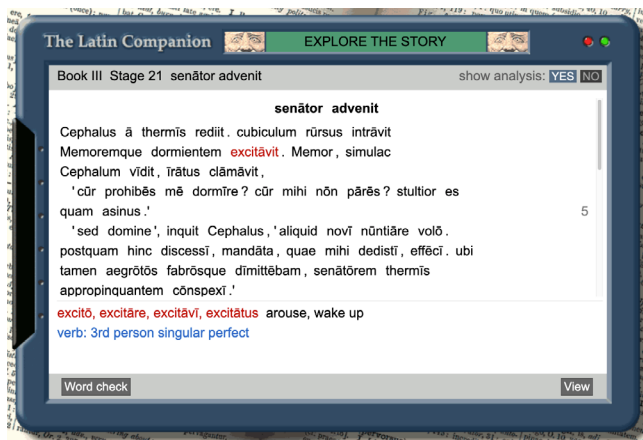


Fig. 4: Cambridge Latin Course, Online Activities: Explore the story (Stage 21) with vocabulary tool in use.

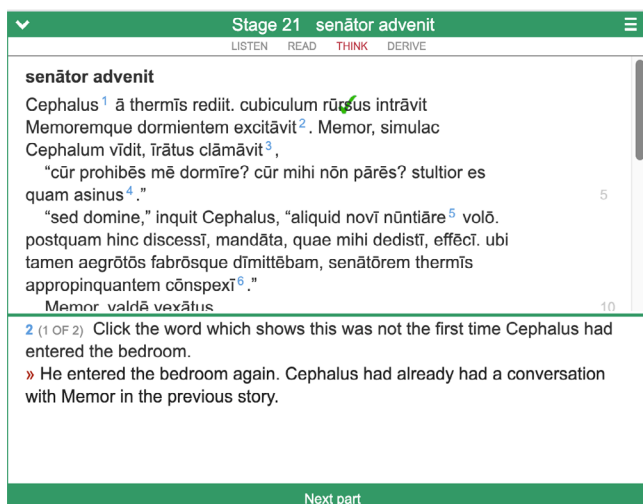


Fig. 5: Cambridge Latin Course, Online Activities: Explore the story (Stage 21) with auto marking comprehension activities in use.

Specific language activities can help students retrieve and rehearse grammar. In the Online Textbooks, these activities are linked to language pages that fulfil a similar function (Fig. 6). The activities support the inductive methods of the course and enable the students to rehearse pattern-forming. The Sorting Words activities (Fig. 7) can be

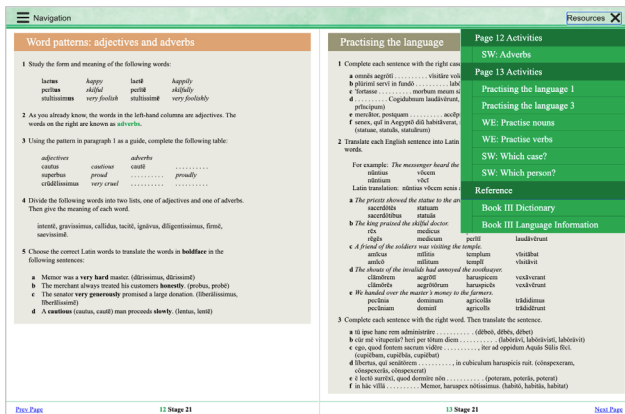


Fig. 6: Cambridge Latin Course, Online Textbook (Stage 21): language page with links to related activities and resources.

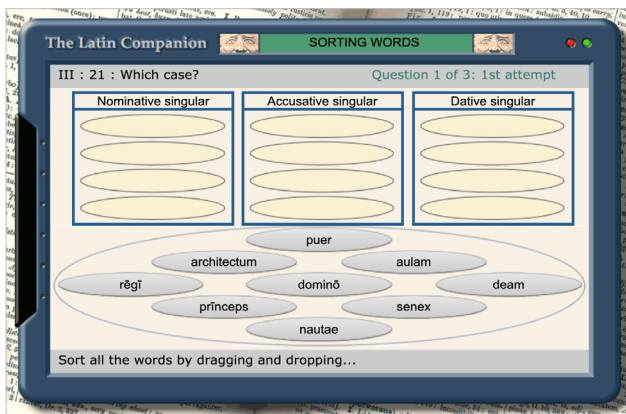


Fig. 7: Cambridge Latin Course, Online Activities: Sorting words (Stage 21) interactive activity.

particularly well-deployed to bridge the gap between contextual translation of a new grammatical form and a subsequent formal exploration. This is low-risk, low-stakes learning: activities that can be repeated with instant feedback. Students are motivated to attempt tasks more than once and are observed as wanting to improve rather than simply to finish.¹⁴ The design of the materials encourages touchscreen use, and physical engagement with the Latin. This physical interaction is one way in which teachers can observe how their students are learning, especially in younger students who may not

¹⁴ Hay 2018, 232.

Stage 21 Practising the Language 3 HOW

animation is ON OFF Question 1 of 6

a. tū ipse hanc rem administrāre _____.

dēbeo dēbēs dēbet

Fig. 8: Cambridge Latin Course, Online Activities: Practising the Language (Stage 21) interactive activity.

Stage 21 Practising the Language 3 HOW

animation is ON OFF Question 1 of 6

a. tū ipse hanc rem administrāre dēbēs.

Type your translation here, then press Return to check it.

Check

Fig. 9: Cambridge Latin Course, Online Activities: Practising the Language (Stage 21) translation activity.

Stage 21 Practising the Language 3 HOW

animation is ON OFF Question 1 of 6

a. tū ipse hanc rem administrāre dēbēs.

you yourself must have looked look after this thing

Very good Tell it to the judge

Sample translation: You yourself ought to organise this affair.

Next

Fig. 10: Cambridge Latin Course, Online Activities: Practising the Language (Stage 21) auto-marking and feedback.

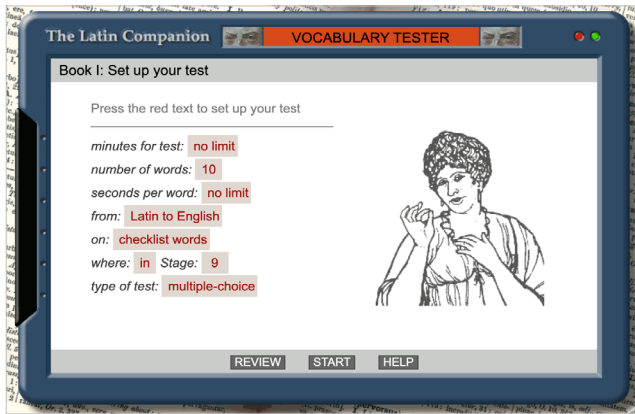


Fig. 11: *Cambridge Latin Course*, Online Activities: Vocabulary tester (Stage 9) with customisation options.

be able to explain their reasoning verbally. Auto-marking has also been used to create short, focused translation practice (Figs. 8–10). As can be seen in the examples, the aim of auto-marking is not only to assess attainment. It should enable student progress, showing clearly where errors have occurred and how to improve. These activities have been arranged across the stages in such a way as to structure consolidation and retrieval of features and forms, and yet again to encourage students toward valuing their individual progress and away from classroom ‘performance’.

The materials are also frequently used in a whole-class situation, most commonly through playing the videos or projecting an online textbook onto a whiteboard or interactive whiteboard. This dynamic often demonstrates some of the best ways in which technology can support dialogic teaching and learning, with materials being explored together, and the teacher guiding discussion and focus.¹⁵ This dialogue can be transformed into independent and collaborative learning, in which digital tools are used to enable students to research around the lesson content and feed into one another’s understanding.

The future of digital resourcing in schools

Constraints on teaching hours, grammar-focussed assessment methods, and numerous accountability measures threaten to shift classroom focus in the UK from intrinsic to extrinsic motivators, from genuine language acquisition toward exam coaching. Written translation dominates UK exams, with the re-emergence of prose composition into Latin – a grammar exercise far removed from communicative writing – and the reproduction of translations of

¹⁵ Hunt 2018, 95–201.

set texts in literature examinations.¹⁶ In our high-stakes system, these examination priorities can end up determining classroom activity. The CSCP receives requests from teachers on tight timetables for more grammar-translation style drill activities and for the materials we produce to be more clearly aligned to exam-board assessment criteria. They have been forced to train their students for an exam rather than teach them Latin using successful methods underpinned by sound pedagogy. Our aim is to develop resources that support teachers in preparing their students for these assessments but crucially enable them to teach effectively even in reduced timetables.

Our new online platform is in the initial stages of development. This platform will differ from previous versions in that it will be the first created in tandem with a new edition of the print textbook. This gives us the opportunity to move our thinking from digital resources that support a course to digital resources as one component in an integrated course. Teachers will be able to log in to an increasingly sophisticated suite of resources and to create a digital classroom for their students, assigning log-ins to pupils in their classes.

All our digital resources, currently spread over different media and accessed in different ways, are being moved to a browser-based delivery. Worksheets, teacher guides, and other print-based resources are being digitised. Teachers will be able to organise their own materials and develop lesson plans within their CLC accounts, which we hope will aid the integration of multi-modal teaching. Digital resources are seen not in isolation but working in conjunction with other resources and activities: the Latin text will be used alongside the archaeology, video, and other resources, and in conjunction with teacher-student dialogue and creative classroom work. Initially this will be a simple curation of materials, but we are considering methods of enabling collaborative work within the CLC materials themselves.

We are implementing progress tracking, with vocabulary and activity feedback linked to individual students to encourage a focus on personal progress over a longer time period than a single session. We are also considering carefully the potential impact of this strategy. As mentioned above, a low-risk environment encourages risk-taking and student ownership, increasing students' focus on their own progress rather than comparison with their peers. When the teacher is also able to access information about their learning, there is a danger of losing this dynamic and instead creating an atmosphere of perpetual assessment. We are investigating ways of turning on and off feedback and tracking, and creating clear teacher guidance.

The overall design of the new platform and how it will be used is only part of our plan for the future. As we create the new edition of the textbook, we are simultaneously planning the next generation of digital resources to provide support and extension, and opportunities for wider learning. This includes additional consolidation exercises, addi-

¹⁶ OCR GCSE Specification: <https://ocr.org.uk/qualifications/gcse/latin-j282-from-2016/> (last accessed March 30, 2021).

tional reading involving the characters from the books, and cultural investigations. We aim to exploit the potential for agile development, rolling out resources in response to changing needs, evolving pedagogy, and research into the ancient world.

Conclusion

After more than fifty years, the core aim of the project still remains “to help make the classical world accessible to as many students as possible” by forging strong links with teachers and learners; advancing the pedagogy of classics teaching through research and development; creating high-quality, innovative teaching materials based on research and development; and exploiting new technologies to reach out to new audiences and create cutting-edge materials.¹⁷ This paper has presented the ways in which the CSCP developed digital resources to fulfil this goal in the past, and some of our plans to continue this work well into the future.

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¹⁷ CSCP 2020.

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