TPRS & Latin in the Classroom: Experiences of a US Latin Teacher

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TPRS IS THE acronym many teachers of world languages in the US and abroad recognise as an effective approach for second language acquisition. Latin teachers in the US are joining the ranks of TPRS teachers with their enthusiasm for the approach and have been involved long enough that applications of TPRS in the Latin classroom are beginning to take on a distinctively Latin approach. In this article, I will briefly describe TPRS, discuss my own experience within the context of the US experience and offer some reflection on the problems and promises of this second language acquisition approach for Latin teachers and students.

Defining TPRS

'Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling' is the brainchild, originally, of Blaine Ray, an American Spanish teacher. His book, *Fluency Through TPR Storytelling*, in its fifth edition, has benefited from an openness to learn from the teaching experience itself. If, collectively, TPRS teachers find that a change to the approach is effective in student acquisition of the language, then TPRS as a method embraces that new insight based on experience. This is an important dynamic for Latin teachers to keep in mind as we continue our own experiment with this approach in our classrooms.

Originally taking cues from James Asher[1] and the research of Stephen Krashen,[2] TPRS developed based on some very basic principles: students make progress in a language when they receive comprehensible input in the new language, when they receive it in a low-stress environment, when the material (the story) is interesting, and when the language level is just slightly beyond their current ability. Hence, TPRS will do almost anything required to make *puella* comprehensible as 'girl,' including a picture, dramatizations, pointing to a number of girls in the room in contrast with a number of *pueri* in the room, or simply saying: *puella significat* 'girl'.

TPRS depends on a low-stress environment with material that is interesting. Nothing achieves this better than a good story, and for most people, good stories are frequently about them, or those with whom they like to identify. While challenging a traditional approach, this is a necessity: the stories must be interesting to the students sitting in the room.

Finally, the register of the language of the story must be at a level that students can understand at that moment with a slight challenge added. For example, students may be at a beginning level, capable of sentences using *est* and *sunt* and nominative cases. Stories built on these kinds of structures grow terribly boring after a short while, so the TPRS teacher may raise the bar just a bit by adding some wild and crazy adjectives into the story (adjectives that a traditional Latin program might not approach until advanced studies or even ever at

all). Further, after the TPRS teacher introduces that a certain *puer videt puellam*, a student may indicate that he/she does not understand '*puellam*' whereupon the TPRS teacher engages in pop-up grammar: an on-the-spot, thirty-second instruction in a point of grammar that the student has called for. The teacher says something like: 'Ah, very good. *Puellam* is the same word as *puella*, but *puellam* is the direct object of the sentence. Does that make sense?' If the students indicate that it does make sense, the pop-up grammar is done and the teacher goes back to telling the story in Latin.

The Unfolding US Experience

A most positive and coherent discussion among Latin teachers about the possible use of TPRS in Latin classrooms began in 2006 on the Latin-Best Practices list[3] (of which I am the owner). I had begun reading and thinking and then 'tinkering' with TPRS in my Latin classroom in 2004. I needed a place where I could talk about what I was doing, how it was going (or not going) and receive constructive feedback either from others who were trying TPRS also, or at least from those who might be sympathetic.

The fabric of TPRS is the willingness to embrace change and to learn as one teaches. I do not gather from any in the extended TPRS community[4] that we are ever aiming for a final product that says: 'This is exactly what TPRS is and how it must be done.' The expectation is that as we teach, we learn and we adapt. Shortly after I went public with my own experiments with TPRS, I offered a ninety minute workshop at the 2007 American Classical League Institute with colleagues introducing the theoretical work behind TPRS in Stephen Krashen's work. The room was packed, with standing room only. The following year, two more colleagues whom I had met through the Latin-Best Practices list, Rachel Ash and Stephanie Sylvester, and I offered a 'how to' ninety minute TPRS workshop at ACL to an even larger crowd, and we demonstrated how we were beginning to use it while aiming at a classical text (Ovid's *Met.* II.760-782, 790-796 — the horrible description of Envy, with which most Latin teachers are not routinely familiar). In short, we taught this passage to eighty teachers who admitted that they had trouble reading it at the beginning of theninety minute session and who reported for the rest of the institute how much easier it was to read at the end of the workshop. Since that workshop, the number of TPRS offerings at ACL has increased dramatically[5]. In 2010, I offered along with my colleague, Keith Toda, a 6 hour workshop in TPRS. The call that emerged from that workshop was the request for 'advanced' material in subsequent years. Enough Latin teachers are now using TPRS that they want and need to work beyond the basics.

Problems and Promises

I close with a brief reflection on the problems and promises of working with TPRS in the Latin classroom. I see three clear difficulties involved with the use of TPRS in Latin classrooms. First, the institutions that define most of our Latin programs call for command of grammar structures about Latin in English and the ability to turn Latin into English (or other first languages). The traditional grammar-translation approach does not admit of the difference between acquiring ability in a language and knowing about a language. The prevailing assumption is that knowing how to turn Latin into English is knowing Latin. TPRS promises to produce students who know Latin but who may not always know the difference between an ablative of means and an ablative of attendant

> 'Latin and Greek are not dead languages. They have merely ceased to be mortal.'
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> — J.W. MacKail

circumstances. The TPRS student may not translate well, if at all, but she/he can read and understand Latin and speak it to some degree. Traditional teachers may encounter these students and think that they do not know any Latin. In fact, they may know Latin better than the teacher while not knowing as much 'about' Latin as the teacher wants. The Latin teaching community is in sore need of work in Second Language Acquisition research.

Second, the simple but nearly tragic problem is that very few Latin teachers have first hand experience communicating in Latin. As part of the traditional Latin program, they feel little motivation to engage in modern immersion programs (often week-long programs in the summer). Hence, a double bind ensues: because teachers are not prepared to communicate in the language, they are understandably tentative about an approach that requires them to speak Latin. Because they do not try, their students do not learn to speak Latin either.

The third problem is, perhaps, a subset of the first. University programs do not provide support for students who have learned to speak Latin but who are not too keen on translating Latin into English. Professors in such programs are likely to complain that these students are unprepared. Students who speak Latin are already complaining that their university professors are unable or unwilling to do so.

I and others are finding promising results from this approach to teaching Latin. 1) We find that the range of students who are able to succeed in learning to speak, understand and read Latin is far wider than the traditional grammar-translation approach produces. 2) The potential for growth in Latin programs that are using TPRS is predictable. If we widen the field of candidates (to nearly everyone) our programs will grow. 3) As we search for interesting material, using TPRS as a means to develop ability in Latin is opening up the range of literature for use from what used to be a narrow classical opus to a 2000-year range of Latin writings.

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Notes

[1] *Learning Another Language Through Actions*, currently in its sixth edition

[2] *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*, 1988 (currently available as a free download from http://www.sdkrashen.com/)

[3] http://groups.yahoo.com/group/latin-bestpractices/

[4] Probably the best place to experience the dynamic flow of this work among teachers is on the TPRS list serve: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/moretprs/

[5] Notes from these two workshops can be found here: http://mygrove.us/oral_latin/index.html