The Learning Objectives of Latin Language Classes

Students taking Latin 101-104, which is the Latin language curriculum (101-103) including one quarter of reading authentic prose and/or poetry (104) at The Ohio State University, usually fall into two categories: The majority are students who after college will never again come across a Latin text, and the minority are students who intend to and/or are going to become professional Classicists. Within the majority group some students may study Latin as part of their Classics major or minor, but most of them take the class to fulfill the/a foreign language requirement of their degree course. Thus we typically have a very mixed student body in Latin 101 through 104 classes, which is also obvious from the language learning skills of the students. Some have never learnt a foreign language before, for others it is the second or even third foreign language. I take this as a starting point to discuss the aims and objectives of Latin language classes at college level and suggest applying the pedagogical concept of concrete competences (Kaiser, 2005), which was originally developed for professional degree courses such as nursing, but it can provide the theoretical framework for the Latin language curriculum by identifying the core competence to be acquired by students as that of translating a Latin text into English. If we take this concept seriously, we will also adapt homework assignments, quizzes, exams and classroom activities to it. On the other hand, it will not influence which learning and teaching methods (e.g. translation methods, vocabulary learning tools), social settings (e.g. working in groups or in pairs) or forms of assessment (e.g. computer-assisted tests, traditional paper-based quizzes) we use since the concept of concrete competences only deals with aims and objectives of classes and curricula. Consequently, the following discussion is meant to be an invitation to think about the objectives of Latin language classes, not a recipe how to teach them.

Course aims and objectives can be defined in different ways. Traditionally, they have been defined from the teacher’s perspective, for example: ‘The aim of this class is to finish Wheelock Chapter 16’, or ‘the aim of this class is to understand the accusative, dative, genitive and ablative and the future and past’. Such definitions are neither useful for students nor for teachers since they are too vague leaving open, for instance, what it means to ‘understand the accusative’ or whether ‘finishing Wheelock Chapter 16’ implies memorizing vocabulary. To avoid these problems, a lot of teachers now define learning (rather than teaching) objectives, instead of or in addition to course aims. By doing so they focus more on their students’ learning process than on their own teaching. An example of a learning objective is: ‘Having completed this class students will be able to recognize dative forms and to translate them correctly into English’. From this statement students can conclude that they must learn to recognize and to translate dative forms and teachers can derive the content of their teaching: teach students to recognize and translate Latin dative forms. Thus, learning objectives are more concrete than course aims. However, they are still considerably vague because they do not mention in which context the new knowledge will be applied. Of course, we know that students ultimately have to recognize dative forms in a text, not, e.g. in a list of nouns, and we may feel no need to state this explicitly. Yet, the context in which knowledge will be applied is in some sense more important than the knowledge itself. For example, it will in the end be more important for students to work out the general idea of a text than to recognize every
dative form. Consequently, it is desirable to integrate the context in which the knowledge we teach will be applied into the learning objectives of a course.

A recent trend in pedagogy, that of ‘concrete competences’, aims at integrating the context in which new knowledge will be applied into the learning objectives\(^1\). The general idea behind the concept of concrete competences is that learning means striving to become an expert in a specific field and it is based on the notion of the expert as someone who deals with the typical situations of his or her profession successfully. For example, a star defense lawyer is renowned for the fact that her clients have not been found guilty by a number of different juries. Other possible causes for such a reputation left aside, this lawyer has a proven record of successfully defending a client, i.e. dealing with the typical situation of her job in a successful way. The concept was originally developed for professional degree courses such as nursing, but it can be adapted to any subject and any teaching setting. If we want to use it for the learning objectives of Latin language classes, we need to identify the typical situations of a professional classicist and from them select those that relate to the classicist’s knowledge of Latin (since we are only talking about teaching Latin language here). The most typical situations of classicists (like those of many other academics) are research and teaching, and Latin will probably be necessary for both of these. In her research a classicist will usually need to understand short passages from different authors that relate to her research topic. In addition, she will most likely also teach Latin at some point. Thus, she will need both the concrete competence of understanding specific Latin passages and that of teaching the language. Since Latin 101-104 is only the beginning of her training, we do not need to worry about covering all the aspects of these two competences when defining the learning objectives of these classes. For example, it would not make much sense to teach pedagogy at this stage. Thus, we can limit what students should learn in Latin 101 through 104 to an early stage of the competence to translate a random passage for research purposes. In other words, students having completed Latin 104 should be able to translate a random passage from an ‘easy’ author (whatever this is - another difficult question that I cannot answer here: I will stick instead to the choice from which instructors of Latin 104 at The Ohio State University usually pick their texts: Catullus, Cicero, Caesar, Ovid, Martial and Pliny).

In his discussion of concrete competences Kaiser (2005: 11-24) provides a template, which can used to describe the learning objectives of any course. This template first asks us to define the concrete competence that we want students to acquire. Secondly, it invites us to describe one concrete typical situation which a student having completed the course will be able to deal with successfully in a short narrative. This is what the template could look like for Latin 104.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concrete Competence:</th>
<th>Translating ‘easy’ (authentic) poetry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Typical situation:</td>
<td>At 11 p.m. James sits in the library and translates 15 lines of Catullus 10. He looks up the words in the back of his edition, which also includes some notes on the lines.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) E.g. Kaiser (2005).
The narrative description of the typical situation applies to just one student in one class. Since Latin 104 could also focus on ‘easy’ prose (or poetry and prose) and since different students study in different ways, we need to generalize our description. This is done by identifying a number of ‘defining attributes’, which account for other classes and students of the same course, to provide the framework of the typical situation.

**Defining attributes:**
- translating ‘easy’ prose texts (Cicero, Caesar, Pliny) or other poetic texts (Ovid, Martial)
- translating texts with dictionaries or wordlists
- using a grammar book

This definition allows for a number of authors to be taught in Latin 104 (though not necessarily in the same class) and takes into account that while there are student-friendly editions for some texts, we will have to work with a dictionary and or wordlists in other cases. The last attribute acknowledges that while James seems confident about his morphological and syntactical knowledge, some of his classmates may not be. To summarize, if Latin 104 students can successfully deal with the typical situation described in the first table with its variations as defined in the second table, they possess the competence of translating an ‘easy’ Latin author and have thus achieved the learning objectives of the course.

If translating a random passage from an ‘easy’ author is the situation that students should be able to deal with at the end of Latin 104, the test of their abilities should consist of exactly this situation: They should have to translate a random passage from an easy author. Since at this point their Latin is not very advanced - they will certainly have only a limited vocabulary and most of them will probably still be struggling with morphology, etc. - it is only fair that they are given the help that is also available to us when we translate a random Latin passage: a dictionary. In addition, we might consider giving them a commentary (especially if one is used for the class) and allow them to use Wheelock to look up paradigms. I do not think we have to be restrictive here, and my rule is ‘everything but a translation’, which includes notes taken by students on texts translated earlier in class. This may not look like the usual Latin 104 final exam, but it corresponds far better to the situations in which professional classicists find themselves, whereas reproducing a translation of a seen text, the usual testing method, seems a very artificial exercise. For, how often since high school or college have you, a professional classicist, been in a situation in which you had to retranslate a text that you once translated before, but now without a dictionary or a commentary? I dare say, never - except if you do not prepare your translation and reading classes. On the other hand, we find ourselves regularly in situations in which we translate an unknown bit from a vaguely familiar text, often with the help of a dictionary or a commentary. In any case, students need more than just books to sight-translate a text successfully. They have to know syntactical concepts such as cases, tenses, moods, subordinate clauses, etc., and more importantly they have to recognize the concepts in a text, define what they mean in a specific context and translate them accordingly. Whether students pass a final exam consisting entirely of sight-translation depends to a large degree on the amount of practice during the course. This means that their chances are best if they have been made go through as many lines or paragraphs of Latin text as possible. Both quizzes and
homework are good opportunities to practice translating texts if they are understood as such. Accordingly, having done one’s homework will mean coming to class with either a list of identified stumbling blocks or a translation that makes sense or a combination of the two and class is where the stumbling blocks are discussed, ideally in a way that makes students understand them as an example of one or the other common problem.

The remaining sections of Kaiser’s template cover different kinds of knowledge that James in our example has to acquire in order to succeed in the defined situation. The section called ‘theoretical concepts’ refers to ‘declarative’ knowledge such as syntax, morphology, scansion. By listing the theoretical concepts for Latin 104 we state what James and our students have to know in terms of factual knowledge in order to sight-translate successfully. The second section, called ‘practical skills’, combines ‘procedural’ and ‘sensory-motor’ knowledge, the latter of which is only relevant to manual skills and professions and not to our Latin course. Procedural knowledge for Latin 104, on the other hand, includes parsing verbs, looking them up in a dictionary, choosing the meaning appropriate for the context, applying the relevant information from the notes of the edition, etc. In other words, this list defines processes that professionals undertake in an automatic manner, but which James, being new to the trade, has to learn in order to be able to sight-translate Catullus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical concepts:</th>
<th>Practical skills:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-syntax</td>
<td>-parsing words to define their syntactical functions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-morphology</td>
<td>-finding words in a dictionary and choosing the appropriate meanings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-basic vocabulary</td>
<td>-using the notes in the back of the edition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-scansion</td>
<td>-applying knowledge of syntax and morphology to specific sentences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because of their close connection to the typical situation, these two lists help us focus on what we are to teach (rather than what we would like to teach) and help students understand the content and focus of the class.

2 It has often been claimed that by revising translations students learn the language better. While I agree with this point in general, I do not think that it is an effective way to teach students to sight-translate. In an ideal world students would do both, in a tightly timed Latin curriculum, learning to translate an unseen text is more important than being able to reproduce a translation of a seen passage. There is nothing wrong with revising translations in principle. What makes it seem a waste of time is the attitude that a lot of students bring to it. While doing their homework they are all too aware that they are writing a provisional translation to be improved in class. In class they focus on correcting their translation rather than on the Latin text. Finally, they study this translation for quizzes, midterms and finals, more often memorizing it instead of retranslating the Latin text. Among all these activities homework only exposes the students to sight-translation, but, as stated above, it is often not taken as an opportunity to practice. Students who are tested on sight-translations, on the other hand, will eventually understand that they need to take every homework assignment as a practice run and improve their skills. In addition, since they do not need time to revise they can be assigned more new text, which again means additional opportunities to practice. Thus, the concept of concrete competences suggests that while certainly not utterly useless revising translations should not be considered an important part of the Latin language curriculum.
The last section of the template is called ‘useful stories’ and refers to ‘situative’ (or ‘recursive’) knowledge. The function of this section is to tell a story as a positive or negative example of how (not) to act in a situation that is similar to those experienced in class or during homework. The idea behind this section is that, life being short, a memorable story can substitute a learning experience so that our students remember what to do when they are in a situation similar to the one in the story even if they have not experienced it themselves.

Useful stories:
In my last Latin 104 class, we came upon a typo in the edition of Cicero’s *First Catilinarian* that we were using. I had not noticed it before assigning the passage for homework. When we got to the sentence after the students had prepared it at home, I asked them whether anyone had had a particular problem. No one had. I then pointed out the typo (the text said *sic* instead of *si!* and they agreed that the sentence made more sense this way though one student insisted that when he translated at home, the sentences never made sense so he could not possibly have noticed the typo.

I take this student’s contentment with a translation that does not even make sense to himself as a negative example of how not to do one’s homework.

Students are welcome to make lists of words, phrases, clauses that they were not able to turn into meaningful English equivalents, but they must identify them as such and present the rest as a meaningful translation (even if it should be wrong).

Kaiser’s template is now complete. It has proved useful both to define the learning objectives of the class (in the first two sections) and for an outline of the learning content in terms of theoretical concepts, practical skills and useful stories to be learnt by students (in the last three sections). Overall, the template has emphasized that the learning objectives of Latin 104 and, by analogy, of higher-level reading classes are translation skills and it has done so by derivation from the knowledge and skills of a professional classicist, thus providing a context for the new knowledge to be applied.

Having defined the learning objectives of Latin 104 in terms of concrete competences, can we adapt the template for lower-level language classes as well? If so, we have a definition of learning objectives taking into account both the context in which knowledge will be applied and the practice of professional academics for the whole Latin language curriculum.

The concept of concrete competences can indeed easily be adapted to Latin 101-103. Here is the template for Latin 101.

**Concrete Competence:** Translating Wheelock Chapter 16: “Juvenal explains his impulse to satire”

**Typical Situation:**
At 5 p.m. Mary sits at her desk and translates Wheelock Chapter 16 “Juvenal explains his impulse to satire” for her class on the following day. She recognizes the (new) third declension forms well, checks some others (such as *ero, vitiorum, potest*) in the paradigms and looks up the new words and some old ones. Finally, she writes the translation down.
**Defining attributes:**
- do any exercise in Wheelock Chapters 1-16
- do sight translations and additional exercises in class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical concepts:</th>
<th>Practical skills:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- first, second and third declension of adjectives and nouns</td>
<td>- identifying subject, verb and object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- present and future tense in 1st and 3rd person of <em>esse</em>, <em>posse</em> and third conjugation</td>
<td>- identifying the nominative of nouns and adjectives and the first person singular of verbs in order to look them up in the word list</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- parts of words</td>
<td>- applying knowledge of syntax and morphology to specific sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- cases (morphology and syntax)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Useful stories:**
A student I had last year in Latin 104 (!) never knew whether a form was genitive or dative. For a long time, I thought (since he was rather weak with forms in general) that he did not know the Latin forms. However, at some point it turned out that he did not know what genitive and dative are as syntactical units. So, even if he recognized the one or other form, he did not know how to translate them into English.

=> I take this story as a negative example of how to relate to the information presented in class and how to deal with one’s weaknesses. I would like my students to become responsible for their own learning and learn how to improve their weak spots. In addition, I want them to participate in an active way so that I can see when they miss or misunderstand essential information.

The list of ‘theoretical concepts’ for the whole class will more or less consist of the table of content of Wheelock Chapters 1-16 since this is what students need to know in order to do the exercises in Chapter 16 even if they do not need everything for every exercise. On the basis of this template, those for Latin 102 and Latin 103 could easily be compiled. However, the real question is how the students will learn to translate, i.e. to access their knowledge of morphology and syntax in order to turn specific sentences into English, and how much abstract knowledge of syntax, morphology and vocabulary they need for that. Different students learn differently, and different teachers have different convictions. Having myself been a student who has easily connected forms in a sentence to the relevant paradigms in my head, I would also teach and test paradigms, principal parts, etc. in Latin 101-103. The same is true for a basic vocabulary. However, there are students who have difficulties accessing knowledge that they learnt in one way (for example as a list) in another context (for example in a text), and they are not to blame. To make sure that these students, too, will be able to pass the class, I would give at least 60% of the testing material relevant to the final grade in the form of sight-translations (in quizzes, midterms and the final exam - on the assumption that 60% is needed to pass) so that a (hypothetical) student who gets 100% right on them and 0% on the rest of the graded items (such as quizzes on principal parts or vocabulary) would still pass the class. The cap on graded items that do not contain translations at below 40% makes sense even if this very hypothetical student does not exist: It reflects the focus of the whole class.

At this point it has become clear that defining the Latin language curriculum in terms of concrete competences is possible and has a number of advantages such as specific items of knowledge being embedded into the context of their final application.
On the other hand, it has also become obvious that this definition is rather narrow and does not account for, let alone encourage, other classroom activities such as singing Latin songs, reading about Roman history or culture in English, etc. In fact, if we compare the focus on translating Latin texts into English established by the concept of concrete competences to the ‘Standards for Classical Language Learning’ of the American Classical League (1997), we see that it corresponds to only one out of their ten standards, ‘Standard 1.1: Students read, understand, and interpret Latin and Greek’, which in turn only covers half of ‘Goal 1: Communication’. This apparent conflict does not mean that either of the concepts is wrong, but that teachers of Latin language classes usually teach more than just the Latin language. This is obvious when we now turn back to the non-Classics majors mentioned at the beginning. Dedicated and committed teachers have found ways to deal with a mixed student body by integrating culture, games, songs, texts in translation, plays, etc. into the classroom in order to make Latin an enjoyable option for everybody. They may not be focusing on the overall objectives of the Latin language curriculum during these activities, but they are taking their other duties seriously: that of promoting Classics in a general way, that of making the most of the one exposure to the ancient world that these students will get, that of raising enrollment figures for the sake of the Department’s funding, etc. While the concept of concrete competences does not account for these activities, it makes clear which classroom activities primarily help students acquire the core competence of sight-translating and which serve other purposes.

In conclusion, the concept of concrete competences provides a framework to define the learning objectives of a Latin language curriculum. If desired, it also helps focus our teaching on the skills and concepts that are essential for students to become competent in Latin. Teaching Latin 101-104 in this way requires some radical changes such as a stronger emphasis on homework, a shift from revising translations to sight-translation skills, and from exams that test knowledge to those that test abilities, but in many other respects such as learning and teaching methods it does not interfere.

Bibliography

