

Teaching Latin as Instant Gratification by Leigh Lowe

ONE OF THE THINGS that makes me smile in life is standing in front of novice Latin students and listening as they recite declension endings, their s' slurred because of missing teeth, their eyes straining upward and heads nodding as they grasp for the mental picture they have of those ten little endings. I also love watching confidence abound as young third graders stand up, chests out and grinning, to deliver the Lord's Prayer completely in Latin. And I revel in the raw excitement of my budding scholars when they rush out of the classroom pointing out the "novus ordo saeculorum" on a dollar bill to their younger siblings.

Instant gratification!

Latin is not the only subject where one can witness the marvels of learning, but the language certainly provides a perfect opportunity to engage enthusiastic young learners.

Latin draws out in young students an insatiable curiosity toward vocabulary. Many times my students are in awe when I first explain derivatives—English words that are derived from Latin root words. It is completely foreign (no pun intended) to students that words are not exclusively English, French, German, etc. Children love thinking of English words as part of a family tree, with their roots grounded in Latin. This notion—that words have relatives and a history—often prompts them to ask about the origins of other English words learned in other classes.

Latin encourages a child to consider the ancestry of words. Exploring words and discussing derivatives is a favorite activity of my young Latin scholars and I must say they do impress when, in regular conversation, they rattle off Latin-based words like "impetuous," "tertiary," and "pugnacious."

In addition to improving vocabulary, Latin allows students to look at the English language and observe grammar systematically. We all know how difficult it is to teach something that is second-nature. How can you teach someone to walk without saying things like, "put one foot in front of the other and just go." This type of instruction is certainly not sufficient for someone who is truly inexperienced and yearning to learn with clear-cut examples.

Latin allows young students to step away from the ingrained knowledge they have of the English language and observe it in a new form. Dissecting sentences, identifying parts of speech, and choosing appropriate declension and conjugation endings, a necessary part of Latin study, reinforces English grammar and provides an unthreatening environment to truly mull over sentences and explore language.

Perhaps even more important than its ability to enhance English education, Latin teaches young students an invaluable formula for learning. The system is intrinsic in the language. Latin requires drill work. It requires repetition and consistency. Most importantly, it requires students to mentally organize information into readily accessible groups. What could be more beneficial to young minds than a model for breaking down material into digestible and available chunks?

Latin language training progresses systematically with clearly defined milestones. My students know that we cannot move on to the next step—be it a new declension or a new vocabulary list—until we have mastered the one before. They are eager to move on, learn more, because they feel slightly restricted, and certainly challenged, to achieve the next objective. Latin education teaches students to organize information and master it in a logical sequence. Certainly this tool is valuable for any field of study.