

## Comprehensible Input for Latin and Greek Before Krashen

CI Commentary on Stuart Blackie's *Greek Primer Colloquial and Constructive*, 1891  
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The following excerpt was posted on Latin Best Practices from the Preface of Blackie's book. Here follows some commentary from a CI perspective.

Bob: Thank you for posting this. I've seen it before and used it in a few presentations myself. I am copying it below and adding commentary from the modern work of Comprehensible Input because that is what this is. There are some observations worth making. I am bolding the items about which my comments pertain.

"Why does it seem such a difficult business to acquire a familiar knowledge of any foreign language, and why is so much brain and so much time spent so frequently on their acquisition with such scanty results? The answer can be only one: because **your teacher has ignored** the method of Nature, and **given you a bad substitute for it in his own devices**;

Bob: 1) Today, we can assume that most Latin teachers who have been in the field for more than 10 years may not have heard about any approach other than a grammar translation approach. Even if they use books like Cambridge, Oxford, Ecce or LNM, they often teach them as if they were Jenney's, LFA or Wheelock's.

Bob: 2) Latin teachers are almost always those "four percenters" who learned to speed translate and who developed a love for grammar and philology. Those are fascinating disciplines of their own, but, as Blackie says here, when they are substituted for delivering understandable messages to students, normal students fail to make progress in Latin. Four percenter students, like their teacher, will do well in grammar and speed translating, and that will deceive them and their teacher into thinking that they are acquiring Latin as a language.

" **instead of speaking to you and making you respond**, in direct connection of the old object with the new sound, and thus forming a living bond between the thinking soul, the perceptive sense, and the significant utterance, he send you to a book, there to cram yourself with dead rules and lifeless formulas about the language, in the middle of which he ought to have planted you at the start. The evil results of this neglect of the living model of Nature are only too manifest. **Books are useful, but they are only secondary**; in all matters of observation and practical exercise they may form an apt accompaniment or a supplement, but they can never supplant the vital function of which they are only the dead record. No one learns dancing, or fencing, or golf, or lawn-tennis from a book.

Bob: 1) Blackie is dead on about the speaking to students. In a sense, it's our only job--to show up and speak Latin to our students THAT THEY CAN UNDERSTAND, about things that interest them, with just a few new words ( 2-4) each day. We now know that forcing production (requiring them to speak back) raises anxiety--what Krashen calls the affective filter--and it will shut down acquisition. Students will speak when they are ready and not a moment before. The only thing we can do to get them ready to speak is to keep speaking with them in understanding, interesting messages.

Bob: 2) Blackis is also dead on about books. They have become our crutch. It's almost the first things Latin teachers ask after greeting each other: which book do you use? What if we had NO BOOKS for the first three years of Latin? Could we simply come to our students and talk to them in Latin in understandable ways with nothing more than a basic vocabulary that we know will be useful in doing so?

The evils caused by this unnatural delegation of the work of a living teacher to the formulas of a dead book are three:

(1) The **direct connection** between the reasonable soul and the new articulate sign of the object is lost; the learner does not shake hands, so to speak with the object, but he cumber~~s~~s himself with the phraseology of his mother tongue, and instead of saying at once *δοῦ μοι ἄρτον, give me bread*, he must first ask what is *the Greek for bread*. In this way the new term remains a stranger to his thought, and he uses it uncomfortably, as when a man puts on a pair of shoes which have only an occasional acquaintance with his feet.

Bob: Communication is the first and most important of the 5 National Standards that apply to Classical languages no less than modern languages. We have done ourselves gross injustice by interpreting that as reading Latin aloud or memorizing passages or learning lists of vocabulary and phrases, or worse, just pronouncing Latin correctly. None of these is direct communication.

(2) Then again, when, after being sufficiently **tortured with mere grammatical forms**, he acquires a certain vocabulary from the elementary reading books, the objects for which **this vocabulary supplies the new names are seldom the objects with which he is familiarly surrounded** and in which he has a living interest, but they relate to something Julius Caesar did in Gaul or Cicero said in Rome some 2000 years ago, a region of strange sounds, in which the linguistic neophyte of this nineteenth century has no particular inclination to move, and to which his memory cannot ally itself with any feeling of kinship; and he easily forgets the word, because he does not care for the thing.

Bob: Forced, direct grammar instruction does not work, and there are no studies that show that it does. In fact, there are studies that show the opposite. New brain research shows that even our understanding of a language's grammar happen largely unconsciously while we are receiving understandable messages in the language.

Likewise, forcing them to read classical literature that they do not find interesting stops acquisition. For reading to be comprehensible input, it must be compelling--it must be something students want to read. For Beginner and intermediate students, fables, myths, and some medieval and neo-Latin are likely more compelling than Caesar and Virgil not to mention that Beginner and Intermediate students (which is what you get after 4 years of study) are not at all prepared for Virgil.

But

(3) even when he does care for the thing, the mere reading of a lesson every day does not in the least ensure that **frequent repetition** of a new vocable in connection with an object, on which the familiar knowledge of a language depends, whereas, if the teacher had commenced by making his schoolroom and echo-chamber of daily repeated sounds in connection with **interesting and familiar objects** directly in view of the learned or near to his daily life, familiarity with a new language, be it **Greek or be it German, would come as naturally and as pleasantly to a clever lad of seventeen as the use of the mother tongue to a dainty girl or a rattling boy of seven.**"

Bob: 1) Blackie is simply describing the requirements of CI--much repetition of the core vocabulary in interesting/compelling ways.

Bob: 2) We can notice that Blackie is caught, like all of us, in the social constraints of his day. This approach he offers, we now know, works with males and females, of any age, with any language, and they don't have to be clever. They can just be normal. They can even be lower than average. The only requirement for making progress in a second language is the ability to speak a first language. He is absolutely right: it works with classical languages just as it does for modern languages. If we want strong, sustainable programs that principals, school boards and provosts of Universities are not tempted to close, I am convinced that we HAVE to do this work. I don't know of a single teacher of Latin who is teaching with CI that isn't noticing strength and growth in their programs and retention rates.

(Blackie 1891, Preface viii-ix)

Blackie, J. Stuart. "Greek Primer Colloquial and Constructive."  
1891. <http://archive.org/stream/greekprimercollo00blacrich> (accessed Jan 10,