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PREREQUISITES FOR MASTERING THE READING OF A LATIN TEXT¹

I am capable of being moved by the mere idea of someone who is extraordinarily perceptive and focused lifting their eyes from a book and noting, rather, to themselves: This is interesting.

Ivan Matoušek (2009)

a leading contemporary Czech writer

Abstract: The paper first outlines the state of the methodology of teaching Roman literature in the Czech Republic (and in the world) and deals with basic considerations about the possible form of literary education in Latin classes. However, the core of the paper is the presentation of the prerequisites necessary for mastering the reading of a Latin text. The paper concludes by offering a possible methodological approach to literary education in Latin classes in the conditions of schools in the Czech Republic and possibly also in Poland.

Keywords: methodology of teaching literature, methodology of teaching Roman literature, Latin language, prerequisites necessary for mastering the reading of a Latin text

WYMAGANIA NIEZBĘDNE DO PRACY Z ŁACIŃSKIM TEKSTEM

Streszczenie: Pierwsza część artykułu koncentruje się na stanie metodologii nauczania literatury rzymskiej w Republice Czeskiej (a także na świecie) oraz ogólnych uwagach, jak w ramach zajęć łaciny można uczyć literatury. Centralną część tekstu stanowi jednak przedstawienie wymagań niezbędnych do pracy z łacińskim tekstem. Jako konkluzję zaproponowano możliwe podejście metodologiczne w nauce literatury w czasie zajęć z łaciny, uwzględniające warunki panujące w szkołach czeskich, a także być może polskich.

Słowa kluczowe: dydaktyka literatury, dydaktyka literatury rzymskiej, język łaciński, wymagania niezbędne do pracy z łacińskim tekstem

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Introduction

Currently, the methodology of teaching literature is still searching for its place among other fields of science in the Czech Republic (and to some extent globally).² This applies even more to the methodology of teaching Roman literature, for its modern conception is only in its infancy. Therefore, in contemplating it, one must proceed not only from the theory and methodology offered by the general methodology of teaching literature, but also from the methodology of teaching Czech/national literature and the methodology (literatures) of teaching foreign languages.³ The methodology of teaching Roman literature must become a synthesis of these disciplines, and at the same time it is necessary to reflect on the specifics of working with the literature of a dead language in this synthesis.

When it comes to the methodology of teaching the literature of individual foreign languages, science in the Czech Republic addresses it rather sparsely.⁴ The cause and effect of this may be the fact that the educational content of the subject of foreign language (and another foreign language) and its literary education is only scarcely addressed in the national curriculum for grammar schools.⁵ There are more foreign studies but those target primarily the methodology of teaching the literatures of living languages and literary education on the same basis. Working with a dead language is somewhat different and researchers dealing with it frequently focus more on other didactic goals than on establishing modern literary education.⁶

The criticism of literary education in the Czech Republic is observed, for example, by Ondřej Hník; he notices in particular voices calling for “literary experience” and the “aesthetization” of education (see Hník, 2015: 41–44). The

² See Hník (2015: 45–46). It is important to note that many great literary theoreticians and historians also addressed didactics, or questions of literary education (Mathesius, Mukařovský, Götz, Hrabák and others). Miroslav Jehlička stated already in 1971 (1971: 9) that the theory of literary education is found on the border of “related” big science complexes, pedagogy and literary science. This is where the theory finds ideas and methods and where its dynamics lies. The methodology of teaching literature as a pedagogical discipline must deal with above all new tendencies in didactics and psychology.

³ In particular, the questions of reading in a foreign language and understanding a literary text in a foreign language are crucial.

⁴ Most of the time, these are primarily language focused studies (often in *Cizí jazyky* journal), literature is often given insufficient attention; see e.g. Hříbková, 1993–1994, 1999–2000; Purm (1993–1994); Tandlichová (1993–1994); Kostelníková (1998–1999); Cornejo (2001–2002); Beran (2006); Kyloušková (2007); Skopečková (2010) and others.

⁵ See *RVP G* (2007). Petr Koubek’s analytical-conceptual study revising the form of literary education in various framework educational programmes can be considered the most recent curriculum document concerning literary education – see Koubek (2019).

⁶ A literary-historical/theoretical rather than literary-educational orientation, e.g. Ancona (2007) or Habinek (2005); a focus on single-author work, e.g. Fritsch (1989, 1993, 1996 or 2002); a focus on statistics and the testing of literary skills in various examinations, e.g. Malaspina (2014); or an emphasis on didactic analysis, e.g. Kuhlmann (2010) – but this collective monograph is very comprehensive and also offers excellent guidance on creative forms of didactic work; and more.

contemporary methodology of teaching literature as addressed by almost all dealing with it in the Czech Republic⁷ shifts the goals of the subject from knowledge to skills, from instruction to reading and creating, from facts to experience and creativity, from quantity to quality,⁸ from “learning about work” to “getting to know the work” (Hník, 2015: 59); simply said methodologically: from science to art. Literary education ought to really be more education than science. Hník reverses the traditional order of activities in classes from “theory – reading – creation” to “reading – creation – theory” (Hník, 2015: 59), i.e.: from a text to literary knowledge.

If Hník’s conception is derived from the disturbing state of Czech literature (= people read little), it brings forward very valuable stimuli for the methodology of teaching Latin literature (= people hardly read at all). It is advisable to accept this conception at least to some extent and to broaden it even more in relation to working with a foreign text and to enrich it by components and elements which are not required when working with a text in one’s mother tongue. Therefore, we consider Martin Löschmann’s and Gisela Schröder’s conception (Löschmann, Schröder, 1984: 68) more suitable for Latin literary education. Their model of foreign language instruction does not correspond fully to the demands of working with a Latin text, but it is inspirational. Apart from the steps which are fundamental to Latin teachers (language preparation, primary perception and understanding of the main idea in a text, checking understanding etc.), it primarily arouses the students’ interest in the reading of a selected text and recalls their inter-subject knowledge. It also puts forth an interpretation which emphasizes active, creative components, aesthetic values and an overall summary of knowledge and emotions. It also presumes a follow-up activity – discussion, dramatization etc. The transition from reading a text through interpretation to making concluding inferences and impressions is apparent here as well. Moreover, Löschmann and Schröder try not to separate strictly individual elements, i.e.: cognitive and affective, throughout the process.

Before contemplating how a model of literary education designed specifically for working with the Latin texts of Roman literature ought to look (that is a task for the future), it is necessary to examine the individual prerequisites for mastering the reading of such texts.

⁷ In particular Lederbuchová (1995, 1997, 2008); Germušková (2003); Nezkusil (2004); Zítková (2010); Bubeníčková (2014); Vała (2011, 2014); Hník (2015, 2017); Koubek (2019); Vojtíšek (2019, 2022); Králíková (2020) and others.

⁸ Hník (2015: 52): “In accordance with the content and goals of the subject, we strive for literary education with the intention to educate, i.e. full-fledged literary education where education to reading is included apart from systematic learning about literary work, literary development and cultural context and also by the effect of artistic text on feelings also the will and character of a child on education to humanity.”

Prerequisites for mastering the reading of a Latin text

General prerequisites⁹

Based on observation and psychological and pedagogical pieces of research, grammar school students have already sufficiently developed reading skills and functional literacy, which are good prerequisites for working with original Latin texts. For a student to understand a text properly, they need not only to digest information included in the text, but also to apply knowledge previously acquired in the field (language). A reader usually only realizes the necessity of this knowledge upon not understanding a given text (see Gavora, 1992: 25–26). If a minimum level of understanding of a text must be achieved to capture the complexity of the majority of works of Roman literature, it is necessary to get to at least level 3 of the scale designed by Jana Palečková and Vladislav Tomášek:

Students are capable of working with principle structures of texts and recognizing hidden or explicitly expressed logical relationships (e.g.: a relationship of cause and effect) on the basis of information included in various sentences or paragraphs (Palečková, Tomášek, 2005: 38).

To understand more complex texts, the following level applies, i.e.:

Students are capable of following language and thematic connections extending over several paragraphs in a text which usually does not include clear leads. They can find, interpret, assess hidden information and understand the psychological or metaphysical meaning of a text (Palečková, Tomášek, 2005: 38).

Reading in a foreign language

A basic prerequisite of reading in a living foreign language is a sufficient knowledge of the linguistic features of that particular language (see Hendrich, 1988: 224), so that problems with understanding do not arise. The reader usually addresses these by converting the vocabulary and structures of the language of the text to those of the mother tongue. If this conversion is restricted only to the clarification of some key words and expressions, it is not necessarily undesirable. However, if reading is dependent on such conversion and the understanding of the whole of the text occurs only through it, reading comprehension does not occur according to, for example, Eduard Beneš. In his opinion, one can speak of this

⁹ The following authors elaborate on not only reading, functional and literary literacy, but also reading and literary competence: e.g. Hana Lavičková (2014: 27–42). Furthermore see Průcha, Walterová, Mareš (2003: 34); Doležalová (2005 – functional literacy); Vágnerová (2012: 369, 379–380) and Langmeier, Krejčířová (2006: 148–149).

only when a reader can understand a text without converting it to their mother tongue (Beneš, 1971: 158; see below).

When it comes to living languages, reading original literary texts is a didactic activity usually only possible in the later years of school, when students have already met given prerequisites. This is often not applied at all because other didactic goals prevail, above all communication (see Kyloušková, 2007: 7).

Methods and forms of work with Latin literary texts

In the case of Latin, the situation is completely different. One strives to understand original Latin texts from the very beginning and representatives of all methods agree that this is a general goal for the instruction of Latin and should be achieved as soon as possible.

Most commonly, one of two basic approaches are adopted: the grammar translation / analytical method on the one hand, and the direct or communication method on the other.¹⁰

The advocates for an analytical approach focus on converting individual segments of a sentence to the mother tongue, word by word, and the work with a Latin text is approached as solving a puzzle. Opponents argue that this procedure is very counterproductive¹¹ and does not bring any value to many students.¹² According to the structural linguist André Martinet as well as to Beneš, the conversion of a single sentence (or a different section of a text of adequate length) to a different language occurs in the form of a whole, not in individual segments (see Fiévet, 2015: 312–313 + note 8).

¹⁰ There are many more methods, these two directions, however, are essential in terms of working with a Latin literary text. For more see below and also, for example, in Kyloušková (2007: 30–31); Choděra (2013: 91–120) ad.

¹¹ See e.g. Hansen (2000: 174): „Students who persist [...] in reading Latin primarily by „solving” each sentence through a „subject, then verb, then object, etc.” hunt-and-gather system may never become comfortable reading quickly and confidently at sight, and they are certainly less attentive to matters of style than those who are able to receive information in the order and manner in which Latin authors present it.” and Pavur (1998).

¹² Andrea Deagon (2006: 33) investigated the so-called “cognitive styles” (“learning styles”) in connection with the methods of teaching Latin, i.e. types of students with regard to the way they learn. She found out that grammar translation is closer to those who focus more on the details of what they learn, are not very influenced by external factors of instruction and practice an analytical approach, i.e., for example, that they create conclusions about the discussed material from rules, instructions, and definitions. However, such students make up less than 10%. Students of different types are also capable of achieving good results through the grammar-translation method, it is, however, only a handful of those who are most gifted. A vast majority of students is therefore more or less lost when using this method, see also Purm (1993–1994: 167), analytical x synthetic reading. Lately, there have been studies disputing the “learning styles” theories; see e.g. Reynolds (2021).

The other method, built on the direct or communicative approach and supporting the active usage of Latin, strives to lead students to learn Latin as a more or less living language and to think in it to a certain extent.¹³

The fundamental difference is in the fact that a student should get to an “ideal” reading of simpler original texts, i.e. without any mediation of the mother tongue, much faster by a direct method than by an analytical one, and as a result the progress to more complex texts should be much faster. However, the question is whether this is realistic. The answer is that in the standard conditions of our grammar schools it is not. For this method to be effective, it is essential that several conditions be observed:

- 1) Latin is taught as a living language, i.e. all productive and receptive language skills are incorporated into instruction from the beginning (reading, writing, speaking, listening), so a student becomes familiar with the language in several ways which simultaneously enrich and expand on lexical, grammatical and syntactic skills and significantly accelerate their progress in language acquisition; the student also works continuously with a large number of texts with an increasing level of difficulty (at the beginning also artificially created);
- 2) instruction must be intensive and classes should meet very frequently without long time intervals between them. Ideally, a student should communicate in Latin (at least in writing) even outside of class;¹⁴ nor should they lack enthusiasm for learning;
- 3) teachers must master classical Latin and be capable of speaking it fluently and correctly, as well as be able to write properly and without mistakes.¹⁵

¹³ See Levine (2006: 51–52): “There is a special intoxicating challenge in confronting an unannotated Latin text and a very satisfying intellectual experience in making the words make sense. Ideally, translation should not be necessary at all; the meaning should rise out of the text straight to your brain without the mediation of a ‘mother tongue’ equivalent,” likewise Markus, Ross (2004: 82).

¹⁴ Such cases are rare and known rather from the past; see e.g. Montaigne (1580/1995: 14–19). Nowadays, Latin instruction based on this method is practiced at only a few schools, e.g. *Schola nova* (Belgium); *Schola Latina* (Italy); *Accademia Vivarium novum* (Italy).

¹⁵ One could contemplate how Latin is spoken in the teacher’s presentation and to what extent it can mediate to a student what a spoken language in the methodology of living languages can do, in particular by a native speaker. Critics of spoken Latin emphasize that it is a construct which is not the same as a spoken language of a native speaker, it is undue and, in this regard, not functional. The language of everyday Latin communication is not known, preserved literary and other evidence close to spoken Latin, or even “general” Latin are always to some extent stylized either in literary or didactic way (comedies, Petronius, cursing tables, didactic *colloquia* etc.). The only things we have available from Ancient Rome are literary texts, whose language is associated with written form. On the other hand, if we derive some expressions from Cicero’s or Plinius’ letters and some other more communicative works, we get to a form of written language which is very close to the formal language of speech. That is, in my opinion, already a form of language acceptable to be used also in instruction by a teacher. However, it is extremely demanding to cultivate such spoken Latin. Various hybrid approaches operating with an artificially created “modern” lexicon and not sticking to classical phraseology or ways of expression of quality Roman authors are more damaging and counterproductive.

Research has demonstrated a relationship between the effectiveness of the direct method and the number of lessons in which it is used or the frequency of its usage. It is usually not possible to achieve so-called “comprehensible input” at grammar schools.¹⁶ It means that a student acquires the target language naturally and quickly only in the case that the stimuli coming from the language mildly exceed the student’s current level. The period between the individual “approaches” to the target language ought not to be long, otherwise contact with the target language is lost and the method fails.

One can reach the stage of reading a text fluently, “naturally” and almost without the use of a dictionary by the grammar-translation method as well. However, one must reach an almost complete knowledge of grammar, acquire a very extensive vocabulary,¹⁷ constantly “train” on more and more texts and be highly motivated. The path to this stage tends to be very long and unfeasible at grammar schools in the Czech Republic, where the most common model of instruction is 2 hours a week / 2 years (in more favorable cases followed by a 1–2 year seminar with 2 lessons / week as well).¹⁸

If we use the grammar-translation method a bit differently (e.g. if we decrease the ratio of “grammar-”) and also incorporate elements of other methods, it is possible to arrive at reading with understanding another way: in our present circumstances, we traditionally understand, and must understand, reading as including the **translation** of a text and subsequent work with it. It does not have to be only the mechanical replacement of a Latin word by a Czech word and then the assembling of these words. We are speaking of a complex procedure which can sometimes be akin to solving a mystery and be quite demanding; however, a student can get to the message of more challenging texts even in the normal conditions of our schools, and even earlier than in case of the direct method. They do not need (nor do they have) nearly as many hours nor such an intensive approach. As soon as a student, with a help of a dictionary, a teacher’s guidance and inter-subject knowledge, arrives at an understanding of the original text via translation (which does not have to be materialized in writing), they reach almost the same position as the ideal reader who does not require their mother tongue. They then really “read” the text, even though the text is already translated, and can work with it

¹⁶ For a detailed definition *Comprehensible Input* (2020).

¹⁷ It is said that one needs to know over 4000 words to be able to read Latin texts with medium level of difficulty (see Miraglia, 2009: 40). Concerning the knowledge of grammar, one needs to master the complete morphology in normative grammar, the syntax of a simple sentence and also the system of complex sentences, the sequence of tenses and at least partly the system of indirect speech (at least in a passive manner, but very well). This conclusion can be reached from the volume of grammatical knowledge in various Latin books which one needs to master before these books offer (usually at the very end) the reading of a more complex unedited text.

¹⁸ Students often reach this stage at the very end of their Master studies at universities. It is in particular the number of texts read that plays a role. Complaints of some pre-World war professors that some (!) students were not able to arrive at an appropriate result by the grammar-translation method indicate that this level was hard to achieve in the past as well.

further.¹⁹ Nor is the aesthetic experience of reading lost, and it may even have multiple layers with this procedure. Translating Latin texts is deeply rooted in the history of Latin education in both the Czech lands and elsewhere in the world and has always been considered one of the benefits of Latin instruction and as an inter-subject link with Czech language and literature lessons, since it has, for instance, significantly contributed to the cultivation of written expression.

Of other available methodological approaches, the so-called intermediary method could also be appropriate for work with Latin texts. Although it is basically founded on the principles of the direct method (strongly focusing on proper pronunciation, listening and speaking), it nevertheless relies on literary texts as the foundation for learning about the culture of a given language. Literary texts serve students as a tool to independently discover various rules of a language. They proceed from the simplest texts of a narrative and descriptive nature and shorter forms to more complex texts. Their reading also serves to expand other language skills. In this method, more complex texts are an entry gate to the culture and literature of the studied language and an excellent basis for intercultural comparisons with their own culture (see Kyloušková, 2007: 31).

Heuristic, dialogical and problem-solving methods are also very suitable for working with literary texts (see Maňák, Švec, 2003: 113–118). In principle, all are based on more or less independent creative discovery and asking the right questions (“why” questions in particular). Thinking is encouraged not by receiving answers, but by asking questions. Answers can conversely stop or hinder the process of thinking. Therefore, answers should be such that they encourage further questions. In a school environment, one can observe that only the students who ask and require further explanation think about the topic and learn something. Proper “Socratic” questioning²⁰ must be systematic, deep and must express an excited effort to search for the truth or at least strong probability.

With regards to the present conditions, it is therefore advantageous to proceed with reading Latin texts in the following way – to, in a single class, connect the linguistic component, i.e. translation, and only then proceed to the real reading of the now comprehensible text, i.e. reading “which is accompanied / followed by interpretation, creative activity, and working with the meaning of the read material” (Hník, 2015: 55).

¹⁹ If we accept the “acceptable losses” that to some degree occur when translating (*traduttore – traditore*).

²⁰ The Socratic method lies in creating confusion in human ideas and disrupting them (elenctic element), to show that what we consider the truth does not have to be true. The need for a serious pursuit of knowledge (or knowledge itself – maieutical element) should be the outcome of this activity. J. Petrželka (2000: web) points out that the pure Socratic method is inseparably connected to Socrates himself; one can, according to him, put into practice only “such a teaching approach which assumes some characteristic elements of Socrates’ procedure without claiming full reproducibility”; see also Paul, Martin, Adamson (1989), Elder, Paul (1998); Hoaglund (1993), Marek (2019).

A hybrid approach can be also considered, e.g. by means of a mirror text.²¹ This approach can accelerate the process of transition from reading and understanding to creative interpretation and does not totally exclude the original text. Bilingual texts simultaneously offer several options of literary-didactic work (e.g. comparing various translations with the original and considering the most suitable solution etc.). However, it is necessary for a teacher to eliminate the tendencies of some students to more or less ignore the original texts and make do with the basic information provided by a foreign translation.

If we were to decide on initial work with an artificially created didacticized text and wish to proceed from it toward original texts, in particular with beginners, it is possible to use an adapted text, i.e. variously adapted originals as an intermediate step.²² Adaptations of works of Roman prose are quite common in textbooks and usually serve for the elimination or modification of elements (difficult syntactic, ideological constructs, unknown lexis etc.) which hinder the understanding of an inexperienced reader. Excerpts (selective adaptations) and explanatory notes are also suitable. If we wish to guide students to an independent evaluation of the benefit of original Roman literature, it is necessary to resort to adaptation as little as possible, and in case of poetry not at all.

As to the forms of literary education one can add that it is very desirable and proven to work in groups because it rids students of shyness and strengthens the outcomes of their work by the synthesis of opinions and impressions. However, all members of a group must participate.

A special area that should be also addressed when considering literary education based on Roman literature which, however, would exceed the scope of this contribution, is the selection of suitable texts.

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²¹ It is a method already used in ancient times, in particular in the 3rd and 4th centuries AD, in didactic texts called *Hermeneumata Pseudodositheana* serving for Latin and Greek education, see for example: Marek (2017) or Dickey (2016).

²² Löschmann and Schröder (1984: 36) distinguish between four basic kinds of text adaptation: **eliminating** (removing unknown or difficult text); **modifying** (using substitution elements, e.g. synonyms; however, imminent devaluation of an artistic value of the text); **selective** (choice of parts of text from the whole) and **supplementary** (supplementing text with notes).

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