



Easy Latin for English Speakers

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Abstract

How the project was born

I am in charge of the Liceo linguistico, a new born course of the Liceo scientifico-Linguistico "Galileo Galilei" in Civitavecchia (Rm). In this secondary school course one of the subjects which is a non curricular language (English, French, Spanish at the moment) is taught in a foreign language starting from the third year. This is the well-known CLIL, a co-operation between the students and the teachers, who are often working together (specific subject and language teacher). So the foreign language is at the same time a subject and the means of communication used to reach another aim, that is to understand the content of another subject. [W. Littlewood, "Communicative Language Teaching", Cambridge University Press]. The meaningfulness of studying Latin is one of the most debated themes which are periodically discussed both in reviews read by a professional public (teachers, didactic scholars), but also on the cultural pages of newspapers. One of the articles which was recently published on "la Repubblica" was entitled "The guy loves Latin- and the controversy starts!" and was the reply, signed by the crossword expert, languages scholar and columnist Stefano Bartezzaghi, ironically answering the letter of a father complaining about his son's interest in the "useless Latin". Bartezzaghi's objection is very simple: "Latin is useless, but it is VERY BEAUTIFUL". Students always find Latin a very difficult subject, especially if taught in a traditional way, so the module proposed was created to increase the students' interest and creativity and to make this subject pleasant and interesting. [S. Bassnett-McGuire, "Translation studies", Methuen]

First Step

The project's plan has been elaborated by me (English language teacher) for a group of second year Liceo Linguistico students. They have been studying English for at least five years and Latin for two years. Of course the cooperation with the Latin teacher has been fundamental, as regards to linking the two subjects as much as possible. One of the main problems is that in a Liceo Linguistico the pupils are sometimes "obviously" concerned with learning spoken languages such as English, Spanish or French and consider Latin to be a "dead" subject. Therefore the first step is giving them the basis of a caring attitude: Latin is, as the article already quoted writes "the basis of everything", it gives you the "forma mentis" which allows you to understand the etymology of the words; school subjects, the article goes on, are not thought to give you what we may call "utilitarian instruments", culture doesn't give you an immediate result, culture is a "one way journey". As regards to "practical" aspect of learning Latin, I would like to emphasize that important language certificates such as TOEFL, which allows you to enter university courses abroad, have a number of questions which are based on the etymology of the words, so studying Latin at Liceo Linguistico is as important as studying the other curricular languages.

So the first great obstacle in teaching/learning Latin is to eliminate the idea of Latin as a useless subject, which only bores and makes you afraid of bad marks!

After an introduction on the project, the students were moderately enthusiastic: the module proposed was about the gladiators, their life, the aspects linked to their condition (analysis of the ancient Roman social classes, building of the amphitheatres). In this way other subjects such as History and Art History were involved too. The main consequence is that the students saw part of their school life not as a separated sequence of single subjects, but as a "whole" in which the data they acquired were not "lost" in the various classes: they became a part of themselves!

What was new was the role of an association, "I gladiatori", whose members wore faithful reproductions of the original Roman clothes and used weapons which were incredibly similar to the true ones, simulating the gladiators' fights. I invited them to school so that the pupils could attend their performance in our Liceo's "Aula Magna", giving this occasion an official form, because 15 year old



pupils need a mental organization when they receive a didactic proposal: they have to predispose their minds to an attitude of "learning by doing".

Before the show, I gave the pupils a series of tasks. They had to: take photos and make a film of the show, write notes on the explanations the speaker of the association gave them, prepare questions to ask, then write a report about the experience for the following week. [M. Finocchiaro, "Teaching learners of various ability levels", ELTJ, vol.33,n°1]

Second Step

The show was performed in the school's "Aula Magna" and lasted about two hours, with a break both for the gladiators and for the pupils.

The use of costumes which the Associazione created after studying original documents of Latin authors and especially the skillful use of weapons made by the members captured the pupils' attention. The performance alternated fights and explanations given by a speaker.

In a second phase the pupils received a questionnaire based both on what they had been told in the morning, but also on what they had studied in their Latin, History, Art History lessons.

In the end some of the pupils also wore some of the armour of the members of the Association, took pictures, fought using fake swords.

Third Step

The results were very good: all the pupils made a detailed report of the lesson in English, many took pictures and one had a camcorder and made a short film. An oral assessment was prepared: as in the Liceo Linguistico there is a weekly conversation class with the "co-presence" of the English teacher with a mother tongue Conversation teacher, the pupils were also encouraged to explain the content of the lesson to another teacher who hadn't attended the previous lessons, so they were obliged to explain what they had learned in a detailed way. Some of them were so pleased that they made further research on the different kinds of gladiators, or their weapons.

The results were good for all pupils, in some cases exceptionally good.

Conclusion

The following step for the students was the creation of a computer work with the use of the pictures taken during the show; some posters were made and attached on the classroom' walls; a small dictionary of the most important words was made; a bilingual questionnaire was created.

RESULTS

All the students agreed about the results of this experience: it was really "easy Latin for English speakers"!

References

- [1] S. Bassnett-Mc Guire "Translation studies" Methuen; London
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- [3] W. Littlewood "Communicative language Teaching" CUP
- [4] S. Bartezzaghi "Il ragazzo ama il latino (ed è subito polemica)" da la Repubblica 18 marzo 2013.