

# Fluency Teaching

*Learning Biblical Tongues  
with Modern Language Techniques*

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## Introduction

The values of our Judeo-Christian heritage, constituting the foundation-stone of Western civilization as well as being an integral part of the worldviews and moral systems of millions all across the world, have their source and wellspring in the sacred writings that have been gathered between the covers of the world's most printed and translated book, the Holy Bible. However, the origin of the Scriptures traces back two thousand years or more into distant cultures that in many respects differ widely from our own. For the scholar, seminarian or interested layman that desires a deeper understanding and appreciation for the roots of our faith and culture, it is necessary to learn to read the Scriptures in the languages in which they were originally written: Classical Hebrew for the Old Testament and Koine Greek for the New Testament (and for Catholics, whose authoritative Bible is the Vulgate translation of 404 AD, Latin as well).

But at seminars and universities, these “dead” languages, no longer spoken by anyone as a mother tongue, are with few exceptions taught in a most dead manner – as a grammatical challenge to be deciphered by an analytical mind, rather than as a living vehicle for sublime thought and human feeling. This approach results in success for only the brightest and most logically-minded students, while many others, including those who generally would pride themselves on having a talent for languages, find themselves dropping out or pushing themselves just past the point of passing the exam – thereafter shelving their dream of truly knowing Greek or Hebrew as a project impossible to realize.

Presenting the Biblical languages as inherently difficult (an assertion that does contain a grain of truth, even though modern-day Russian and Arabic might rank higher in complexity) covers up the pedagogical poverty involved and puts the blame squarely on the shoulders of dejected students. This paper, however, will argue that the Biblical languages' reputation of insurmountability is largely a product of antiquated teaching techniques that were rejected more than one hundred years ago for instruction in modern languages, but remained in use for the classical languages due to pedagogical conservatism and elitist thinking.

It is the author's hope and prayer that the reader will be challenged to question pedagogical truths that have been taken for granted for far too long, and emerge with a mind stimulated to see new possibilities in this ancient discipline of Biblical language pedagogy.

## Setting the Goal: A Limited Fluency

What does it mean to know a language? Specifically, what does it mean to learn a Biblical language, according to the traditionalist methodology widely used at seminars and universities? This introductory chapter will briefly sketch the status quo of classical language pedagogy, and then put the time-honored principles of the traditionalist paradigm into question by suggesting that is it high time for us to raise our sights and expectations. But first, let us begin by taking a fresh look at Biblical language pedagogy in its historical context.

### The Grammar-Translation Method

From the Dark Ages onwards, when in Western Europe high culture meant the heritage of ancient Rome nurtured and preserved by the Catholic Church, children in grammar school have labored to learn and memorize the paradigms of a language foreign to them – Latin, that prized tongue which long was held to represent the epitome of human development. For many a young student, though, it rather represented a recurrent threat of pain and punishment as lapses in knowledge were often met with physical discipline, in places well into the 20th century.

The stick may have disappeared (missed by none except the odd sadistic teacher), but the basic method and philosophy remains in use at many seminars and universities for instruction in “dead languages” such as Latin, Ancient Greek and Biblical Hebrew. A dead language is defined as no longer being spoken as a living language, and therefore it is taught with a reading-only approach since the

#### GRAMMAR-TRANSLATION METHOD<sup>3</sup>

##### PSYCHOLOGY

- Mastery of a language equals mastery of its grammatical rules
- Written language is chief, no oral component needed

##### METHODOLOGY

- Memorization of paradigms and vocabulary lists
- Translation exercises from target language to mother tongue

##### GOALS

- “Meticulously deciphering a classical text”<sup>4</sup>
- To develop intellect and logical ability

main goal is to enable the students to experience the ancient cultures first hand through reading source texts in the original languages.

Traditionally, however, there has existed a secondary goal for classical instruction of this kind. Disciplined memorization of grammar paradigms and vocabulary lists were long held to train and develop a sharp intellect and logical ability, which may constitute the reason for the unwillingness to reform classical language instruction. A university subject, which these languages have become today, is supposed to be taught in a detached and analytical manner, a teaching style which lets only the brightest and most analytically-minded students excel and leaves many others in failure and despair.

This mentality is well reflected in a pedagogical debate that took place in the 90s in the *Modern Language Journal* over the correct pedagogical approach for the teaching of Latin. The traditionalist side described the ideal pedagogy in terms of “meticulously deciphering a

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed survey, see Richards, Jack C., and Rodgers, Theodore S. (1986), *Approaches and Methods in Language Learning*, pp. 1-5.

<sup>2</sup> Ball, R. et al (1996), *The Emperor’s New Clothes: Hyperreality and the Study of Latin*, p. 82.

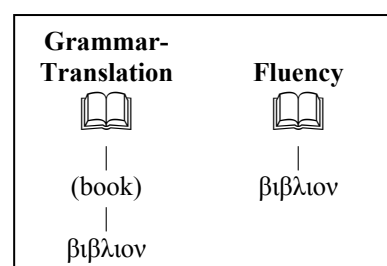
classical text” and defined the goal of their teaching as “learning to translate the classical texts with rigor and depth”, while they accused their reformist opponents of “turning a unique discipline into a travesty of the challenge that it has always represented”<sup>3</sup>.

While everyone that has tried learning a classical language according to the traditionalist methodology will agree that it does represent a serious challenge, not everyone would agree that it necessarily must be this way. Is it reasonable that even doctors and seminary professors, after decades of laboring over ancient texts and teaching beginning students, are still unable to open their class with a heartfelt prayer in Biblical Greek or Hebrew?

### Raising the Standard: A Goal of Fluency

The Grammar-Translation way of “meticulously deciphering a classical text” might be imbued with an aura of prestige accumulated through centuries of university teaching, so that a notion of “this is the way it must be” is firmly entrenched in the minds of teachers and students. Still, one can wonder if the original audiences of Paul’s epistles or Isaiah’s prophecies labored to analyze and decipher the grammatical forms of their words. Would they not rather have been shaken with emotion, either in humble repentance or heartfelt rejoicing over the divine promises given through the prophet’s writings?

The reason for this is, of course, that they heard or read a text written in their mother tongue – a language of which they had an instinctive grasp and which they spoke on a daily basis. And though absolute mother-tongue fluency is beyond the reach of modern-day man, since only the written and formal varieties of the classical languages have survived until the present day, this paper will argue that it is possible to acquire a limited fluency by internalizing the grammar and connecting vocabulary directly to thoughts and concepts instead of mentally translating every word to one’s own language. This is the experience of C. S. Lewis, who in his autobiography recounts how he, through extensive reading, reached a new level of fluency in his studies of ancient Greek:



*The great gain was that I very soon became able to understand a great deal without (even mentally) translating it; I was beginning to think in Greek. That is the great Rubicon to cross in learning any language. Those in whom the Greek word lives only while they are hunting for it in the lexicon, and who then substitute the English word for it, are not reading the Greek at all; they are only solving a puzzle. The very formula, “Naus means a ship,” is wrong. Naus and ship both mean a thing, they do not mean one another. Behind Naus, as behind navis or naca, we want to have a picture of a dark, slender mass with sail or oars, climbing the ridges, with no officious English word intruding.”<sup>4</sup>*

The process of internal simultaneous translation not only slows down reading to a tedious crawl (and renders listening comprehension or speech production impossible), it also bars the learner from being initiated into the language community as a member rather than as an onlooker who knows the language only from afar. Every language encodes a culture, and without first-hand access to the categories of thinking expressed in the particular language it is impossible to attain to an in-depth understanding of the ideas enunciated in the source texts.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 82.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis, C. S. (1958), *Surprised By Joy*, pp. 114-115.

In recent years, fluency teaching has gained increasing recognition in the world of classical education, a process that has begun on the intermediate (high school) level<sup>5</sup>. In the 1990s, the state of New York adopted this view in a syllabus called *Latin for Communication* (thereby sparking the previously mentioned debate in the *Modern Language Journal*), which as an example of a reasonable goal to be expected from an advanced student states that he should be able to read “with emotion a speech of Dido from Vergil’s *Aenid*”.<sup>6</sup> Emotion presupposes instinctive understanding; such fluency is what we expect from learners of modern languages. Why should we expect less from those preparing to study and teach sacred texts of supreme importance?

### **Answering Objections**

Critics will of course immediately raise the charge that it is impossible to achieve fluency in a dead language, a language whose community of mother tongue speakers died out centuries ago. The spoken varieties of classical Hebrew, Greek and Latin are beyond our reach, forever lost in the mists of time. All that remains for us to study are the dialects and modes of expression that were formal enough to be considered worthy of being fixed in writing. Should not formal language be studied in a formal way?

And even if the student would succeed in achieving some kind of fluency in, let’s say, classical Greek – will the language he produces then be real Greek, or rather some hybrid mixture of Greek and English (or whatever mother tongue he happens to have)? If there remains a possibility of corruption or misunderstanding, is it not then better to keep your head clear by sticking to analyzing grammar and translating given texts?

In answer to objections and reservations like these, the author will readily grant that the study of classical languages differs from that of modern languages in some respects. This paper represents a call to pedagogical renewal, not to re-creating a whole community of mother tongue speakers as did Eliezer Ben Yehuda (a 19th-century linguist who spearheaded the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language by speaking only Hebrew with his baby son from the first day onwards).

Therefore, the term “limited fluency” has been chosen to represent an active internalization of basic grammar structures with a view to helping the student into a free, fluent and enjoyable reading experience. This, and nothing else, is the goal of fluency teaching as advocated in this paper.

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<sup>5</sup> In the words of one policy statement, “Multi-sensory models and materials especially suited to the interests, needs and abilities of secondary-school students can make the teaching of Latin more meaningful than using a traditional approach at those levels.” (Statement by the National Council of State Supervisors of Foreign Languages: *The Role of Latin in American Education* (1969), p. 309)

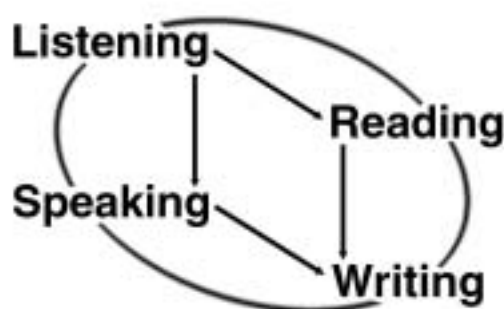
<sup>6</sup> *Latin for Communication*, p. 21; quoted from Ball, Robert J et al (1996), *The Emperor’s New Clothes: Hyperreality and the Study of Latin*, p. 78.

## Sketching the Path: Principles of Modern Language Pedagogy

Having rejected the time-tested paradigm of Grammar-Translation (tested and found wanting), it remains for us to sketch out the path for a new and more workable paradigm for the teaching of classical languages. Such a paradigm would of course have to borrow heavily from theories of modern language teaching, yet adapt these to the unique circumstances connected to learning a language that lacks a vital community of mother tongue speakers. Over the following pages, we will attempt to describe some principles from theories of modern language teaching and weigh their applicability for classical languages.

### The Four Skills Approach

When learning a modern language, the student needs to pick up all the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing (usually acquired in that order)<sup>7</sup>. He will need listening comprehension and oral skills for interaction with members of the language community in question, and a basic literacy for understanding signs and documents and for corresponding by means of notes or letters. Moreover, he will probably want to partake of the cultural world through radio, television and literature, requiring even deeper listening and reading skills respectively.



The four skills

Of all these situations, only the very last one (reading for literature) is applicable for the classical languages.<sup>8</sup> But the previously mentioned *Latin for Communication* gives guidelines for instruction in all four skills: the examinations test the students in listening comprehension, oral proficiency, reading comprehension and composition, and the students are to learn how to conduct actual conversations in Latin, even though reading is emphasized as the primary goal.<sup>9</sup> This instance of modern language pedagogy attracts harsh criticism from traditionalist teachers:

*The four skills approach places the curriculum on quicksand, because the students spend time on activities that hinder them from learning to translate the classical texts with rigor and depth... they are simply wasting time on the other skills employed in modern language teaching.*<sup>10</sup>

The assumption of Ball & Ellsworth is that there exists no relation whatsoever between the four skills, that learning to listen and speak will even constitute a hindrance for learning to

<sup>7</sup> Huebener, (1959), *How To Teach Foreign Languages Effectively*, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Traditionally, instruction in classical languages has included prose composition (writing) in addition to reading, especially since Latin has been a living language of communication in Europe for matters of science or theology (in wider circles up into the 19th century, and in places still within the Catholic Church). Nowadays, however, composition has fallen out of favor (see Parker, William Riley (1964), *The Case for Latin*, p. 10).

<sup>9</sup> *Latin for Communication*, pp. 16-17; quoted from Ball, Robert J et al (1996), *The Emperor's New Clothes: Hyperreality and the Study of Latin*. In: *Modern Language Journal* 80(1), p. 78.

<sup>10</sup> Ball, Robert J et al (1996), *The Emperor's New Clothes: Hyperreality and the Study of Latin*, pp. 81-82.

read properly. A viewpoint with a lot more common sense to it is represented by their opponents, who see in oral exercises a tool that can be used to “enhance and promote the ultimate goal of reading”<sup>11</sup> by building a limited fluency:

*...what exercises of this sort [oral] do is provide a model of Latin as communicating meaning, and set up simple patterns of response which will give the student a better instinctive understanding about what Latin phrases say. Relating Latin to their environment gives students a firmly grounded, rather than purely intellectual, sense of its meaning.<sup>12</sup>*

## The Primacy of Listening

The existence of a positive transfer between the skills – most notably, from listening comprehension to other skills – is verified by the empirical studies<sup>13</sup> of psychologist Dr. James Asher, famous for his pedagogical method of Total Physical Response (TPR). Just like another famous Teacher, he sees in children the paradigm that adult disciples are to emulate for successful learning. By listening and obeying parental commands long before he is able to produce any utterances, the child develops an internal linguistic structure which gradually grows into a fluent command of his mother tongue. By using a similar methodology, Dr. Asher’s method seeks to tap into the innate biological program for language learning that enables every child to attain fluency in his mother tongue.

Yet when we for comparison turn our attention to traditional instruction in classical languages we find the oral part completely missing, save for the reading aloud of sentences before translation – a curious state of affairs, requiring speech production without any foundation of listening comprehension! Is it possible that classical languages are considered so difficult simply because traditional pedagogy (willfully?) ignores a step that the brain requires by virtue of being constructed the way it is?

### TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE

#### PSYCHOLOGY

- Children’s language learning as a model
- Memory strengthened by motor activity
- Listening comprehension precedes production

#### METHODOLOGY

- Respond to imperatives with physical action
- Delay speech production until it comes naturally

#### GOALS

- Internalize linguistic structure of target language
- Proceed to other methods once listening comprehension is established

<sup>11</sup> Abbott, Martha G. et al (1996), *Hyperreality and the Study of Latin: Living in a Fairy Tale World*, p. 85.

<sup>12</sup> For a fuller discussion, see Deagon (1991), *Classical Journal* 87, p. 59-70 (quote from p. 63).

<sup>13</sup> In Asher, James J. et al. (1974), *Learning a Second Language through Commands: The Second Field Test* is described how Asher’s experimental group, after 45 hours of TPR teaching in Spanish (70% listening with actions, 20% speaking and 10% reading/writing), was subjected to two tests (one of Asher’s design, one official Pimsleur proficiency test) and compared to two control groups of college students with 75 and 150 hours of standard audio-lingual training respectively. In both tests, the 45-hour group of TPR students outclassed the 75-hour group at reading, speaking and listening, and was comparable to the 150-hour group. Asher comments: “Perhaps the most important finding was the large magnitude of transfer from listening to other skills.” (p. 30)

## Context and Communication

However, putting an emphasis on listening comprehension should not be understood as encouraging passivity from the part of the student, since active learner involvement is a prerequisite to successful learning (in the words of Benjamin Franklin, "Tell me and I forget, teach me and I remember, involve me and I learn"). In Dr. Asher's model, the beginning student, unable to produce much in the target language, instead responds in his native "body language" with physical actions ("Total Physical Response"). Thus, communication is established between teacher and student, resulting in a dynamic atmosphere of interaction that energizes the participants and makes learning fun – definitely more so than the traditional grammar-lecture style of instruction.

Communication is also the keyword for another similar modern language paradigm called The Natural Approach, fathered and sponsored by Dr. Stephen Krashen, applied linguist at University of Southern California. Dr. Krashen advocates using the target language at all times in the classroom. According to him, traditional grammar explanations in the mother tongue language build a "monitor" inside the student that enables him to talk *about* the language he is supposedly learning ("that form is a second person plural active present indicative"), but rarely help him any closer to his goal of actually knowing or speaking the language. In the words of Dr. Krashen,

*Learners should not try to learn a language in the usual sense. The extent to which they lose themselves in activities involving meaningful communication will determine the amount and kind of acquisition they will experience and the fluency they will ultimately demonstrate.<sup>14</sup>*

With strong faith in the inductive capabilities of the human brain, Dr. Krashen shuns explicit grammatical analysis and instead sees the role of language instruction as providing concrete situations of language use arranged in ever-increasing levels of complexity. According to the Input Hypothesis that has been formulated by Dr. Krashen and constitutes the theory of language learning underlying the Natural Approach, learning occurs when the student is subjected to language whose level of complexity is just beyond his current level of comprehension (i+1).<sup>15</sup> As the student infers the meaning of the unknown words or structures from the context (which is richly provided by means of props and visual aids), the language is internalized and connected directly to thought processes – which is just another way of expressing the idea of fluency.

### THE NATURAL APPROACH

#### PSYCHOLOGY

- Input Hypothesis: inductive learning

#### METHODOLOGY

- Use target language only
- Provide visual aids and context to help induction
- Involve students in real communication

#### GOALS

- Link target language to thought processes
- Attain reasonable oral fluency

In addition, room is provided for participation and interaction according to the students' increasing capabilities. They will at first participate silently and only through actions (TPR), then with single words or phrases, and finally with increasing fluency as the language is

<sup>14</sup> Quoted from Richards, Jack C. et al (1986), *Approaches and Methods in Language Learning*, p. 139.

<sup>15</sup> See Krashen, Stephen (1989), *We Acquire Vocabulary and Spelling by Reading: Additional Evidence for the Input Hypothesis*, p. 441.

internalized. In this way, they follow the same stages of development as the child learning his mother tongue – thus the name of the method, “The Natural Approach”.

And this may sound really sensible for modern language instruction – but what does it have to do with those who study ancient languages mainly in order to exegete sacred texts? The answer will of course be that this is the way that King David learnt his Hebrew, the apostle Paul his Greek and Jerome his Latin. Even in a later era, the French Renaissance thinker Michel Montaigne recounts his experience of learning Latin not through rote memorization of grammar tables and tedious translation exercises, but by conversation and communication: “Without methods, without a book, without grammar or rules, without a whip and without tears, I had learned a Latin as proper as that of my schoolmaster”<sup>16</sup>.

### Modern Relatives

Having extolled involvement in oral communication as a supreme way of learning any language, it may now be wise to make a pause in our study of modern language techniques and consider the opportunities for such communication as regards the “dead” languages Hebrew, Greek and Latin. A quick look at our modern world will reveal the existence of flourishing language communities numbering in the millions who speak modern forms of the said languages with mother-tongue fluency. How much have these language forms changed throughout the centuries? How much would a seminarian benefit from a knowledge of, let’s say, Modern Hebrew in his study of the Old Testament?

The question is definitely worth raising, since these languages can be learnt relatively easily with contemporary techniques by mother-tongue speakers scattered across the world (often lecturing at universities). After all, what would we think of a Russian student of literature who out of his fascination with Shakespeare in translation wants to read him in his original language, yet has no use for modern English which he regards only as a hindrance in his quest to master Elizabethan English?

The relative value of fluency in the modern variant would be different for all three ancient classical languages. For Latin, the modern forms would be Italian, Spanish and possibly French. As these languages are outside of the author’s area of expertise, he cannot offer any more informed judgment than a general feeling that these languages have developed quite far from their original Roman form.

When we turn to Greek, we find that the language at least has kept its name throughout the centuries. Also, the ethnicity of the language community remains unchanged (as opposed to Spanish and French), and this fact coupled with their justifiable pride in their cultural heritage (both classical and Christian) has kept the Modern Greek language closer to its roots, in spite of centuries of Turkish occupation and influence.<sup>17</sup> Still, it remains an open question for further investigation how much the transfer a learner of Modern Greek would experience when turning to the Koine Greek of the New Testament.

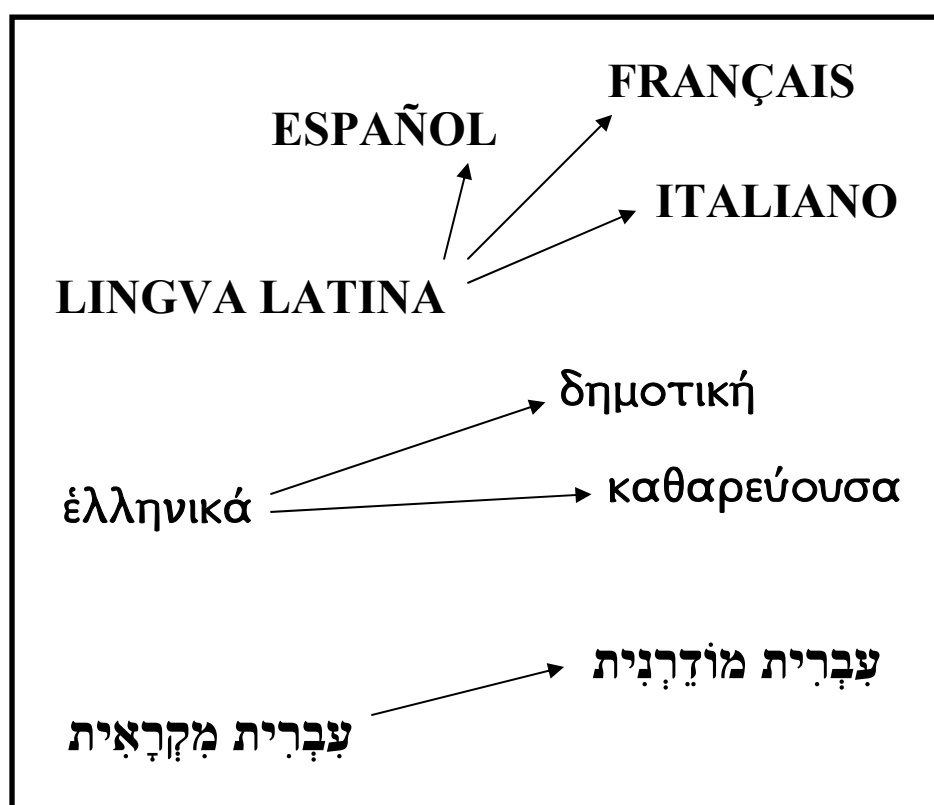
Regarding Hebrew, though, the author can testify from personal experience that the modern form is all but identical to the Biblical dialect as regards morphology, with most of the

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted from Richards, Jack C. et al (1986), *Approaches and Methods in Language Learning*, p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> In fact, Modern Greek consists of two “dialects” that coexist throughout Greece: *dimothiki* for casual communication and *katharevousa* for more formal contexts. Of these, the former is more affected by Turkish influence and linguistic development, while the latter retains more of its likeness to the classical works.

vocabulary remaining in use as well (syntax, however, has changed considerably and now resembles English and other European languages). This of course stems from the fact that Hebrew was artificially revived as a mother tongue language in connection to the rise of Zionism in the late 19th century, which is why it has not seen centuries of independent development and linguistic mutation. Therefore, it is highly recommended for anyone wanting to learn Biblical Hebrew to take Modern Hebrew as well and thereby benefit from the blessings of modern language pedagogy. For those who are willing to invest the effort (and anyone preparing for serious work in the Old Testament should consider doing so), it is quite possible to achieve fluency in Modern Hebrew and read the original version of the Hebrew Scriptures rather effortlessly.



### Reading strategies

For, just as the modernizers of classical language pedagogy admit<sup>18</sup>, it is a reading fluency and not oral proficiency that is the end goal of instruction in these languages. Any fluency is the product of years of language use, something that is developed only after and outside of language courses. When the exam has (hopefully) been passed and the student is on his own, the real test comes: will he let his knowledge dissipate through disuse, or will he actually continue using the language and keep improving his mastery of it?

Even orally-oriented modern language pedagogues such as Dr. Krashen see extensive reading as the best way of acquiring vocabulary<sup>19</sup>, once a basic oral fluency has been established

<sup>18</sup> Oral exercise is not seen as a goal in itself, but as a way to “enhance and promote the ultimate goal of reading” (Abbott, Martha G. et al (1996), *Hyperreality and the Study of Latin: Living in a Fairy Tale World*, p. 85).

<sup>19</sup> Krashen, Stephen (1989), *We Acquire Vocabulary and Spelling by Reading: Additional Evidence for the Input Hypothesis*, p. 441.

(perhaps the process could be likened to a grammatical skeleton first being built up by oral practice, with vocabulary flesh then being added to the skeletal structure by reading). By encountering new words and inferring their meaning through context, the student learns much more than the translated definition found in a word list – he will get the feel of the word, understand its stylistic value and what associations it carries, learn about collocations and valence (e. g. interested *in* something, not of something). Besides, reading will be faster and more fun if it is not interrupted by dictionary-flipping every other sentence.

When continued reading ranks so high in importance (and it is the *only* way of putting classical language knowledge to real use), it is imperative that the instruction equips the student with tools to be able to work his way through a text on his own after the course is over and no instructor is present to explain the text or motivate by imposing homework. A successful reader approaches his text with some foreknowledge of what it is about (by inference from the title or, more commonly for ancient works, through knowledge of biographical information) and is not bogged down by minute details of grammar, but reads with a goal of understanding the general message of the text (confirming or disproving his initial assumptions). Therefore, unknown words can be skipped if the meaning of the sentence and its place within the text remains clear.<sup>20</sup>

For any reader so prepared, the reading of source texts will not present a tedium of grammatical analysis or flipping through dictionaries, but rather an ever-increasing joy that grows with the fluency and ease he develops by constantly exploring new texts. As he digs into the bountiful treasures stored up in the rich spiritual and cultural heritage of the ancient writings that make up the foundation of our modern civilization, he will carry the torch of a living classical legacy into the future as a light for generations yet to be born.

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<sup>20</sup> These principles have been condensed from Clarke, Mark A. & Silberstein, Sandra (1977), *Towards a Realization of Psycholinguistic Principles in the ESL Reading Class*, and a study of Hosenfeld, Arnold, Kirchofer, Laciura and Wilson (1981), reviewed in Raptis, Helen (1997), *Is Second Language Reading Vocabulary Best Learned By Reading?*, p. 573.

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