

Keep Calm, I Take Latin as a Subject

by Huzefah Hanif

‘Why would you choose Latin?’ I have been asked an overwhelming amount of times, to which, over time, my simplified answer became ‘because I didn’t want to do drama’. I realised that my initial wearisome and somewhat preprepared speech wasn’t able to effectively communicate my admiration for the intricate and sophisticated subject. Not only for how it enriches the mind in school but also how studying the history that comes with it leads to the understanding of the impact the classical times has had on our society, from the way it works to the way it doesn’t. For these reasons, I firmly believe that all school pupils should have the opportunity to study Classics.

Let’s face facts. Learning Classics won’t exactly bless us with the intellect of Albert Einstein (then again neither will sketching curves on imaginary graphs) but research shows that learning the Latin language can improve one’s grammar, syntax and the general quality of one’s English. Of course, very few hormonal adolescents will appreciate being slumped in front of a hefty list of words, to which at the time the only enjoyable outcome would be recognising the various derivations of Harry Potter spells. As it turns out, the memorisation of vocabulary and grammar rules enhances memory and recall and trains the mind to have precision and accuracy. These skills can be applied across a wide range of professions, from accounting, directing, or even writing about the adventures and

quests of a teenage wizard in an oddly dangerous school.

In addition to the intellectual boost Latin provides, it also moulds our problem-solving and logical-thinking skills due to Latin’s consistent phonetic pattern, quite like mathematics. It forces us to tackle a sentence logically and analytically, which can affect how we handle other problems we encounter. A study was conducted in 1979 by educationalist Nancy Mavrogenes in Iowa, who split a year group into two sections, one which studied Latin on top of their usual subjects and one which didn’t. As it turned out the group which studied Latin ended up performing better than the group who didn’t in the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Latin can do more for our minds than we think.

The Classical world is ubiquitous. It’s everywhere. Latin and Greek don’t just resemble Maths, but can be traced in sciences, music, literature, theology, and particularly philosophy (notice all the names of these studies are derived from Greek or Latin). Classics is the polar opposite of ‘dead’. It plays a great part in law and politics, most of which you may not realise. The rhetoric I’m using this moment was used 2000 years ago by world-famous prosecutor Cicero. In the medical field, the Latin language can be picked up everywhere, from abbreviations on medication to instructions in a letter from your doctor. Examples, to name but a few, include ‘stat.’, from *statim* meaning ‘at once’, or ‘mane.’, from *mane primo*

meaning ‘in the morning’. Roman and Greek thinkers such as Plutarch, Seneca the Younger, and Pythagoras have shaped and moulded most modern beliefs and views, for example, the world is a sphere (although, to my amusement, it seems this particular discovery has been under more fire than ever recently). In an ever advancing and progressing world, with society and civilisations forming everywhere, we must never forget how it initially began. The mother tongue of society. The language of religion, mysticism, alchemy and more. Surely Classics continues to thrive in our modern day society?

One of the most critical aspects of learning Classics would be the thorough insight it gives us into the relationship between life then and now, showing us how our society works the way it does. Economists will know the drawbacks and difficulties of inflation. What they don’t know is that the Emperor Nero got to know about them too. The current economy has learnt a great deal from the Roman Empire, an example being Nero’s inflation incident. The last emperor of the Julio-Claudian dynasty (oddly coincidental given what follows) decided to use less silver in coins in order to make more. Over the next 200 years, inflation forced the prices of wheat and crops to boom, resulting in the Roman coin becoming completely useless. Unfortunately, inflation still exists; however, due to lessons from the past; our economy has been saved from

potential over-spending, debt and over-production of primary goods. Another excellent example of how the Roman times have helped us is with regards to health. Seneca the Younger was the first to notice the unhealthiness of being obese, which at that time was a sign of wealth. Nowadays, being overweight is an indication of poor diet, sometimes due to poverty. Ovid's Epics such as the story of Daedalus and Icarus have taught us the importance of listening and obeying elders, as well as the dangers of hubris. Although the latter may not apply to all of us, those who are religious strictly abide by the boundaries of pride and defiance.

So we've established that there's a valuable history within Classics but why should we, the general public, be concerned with this? By learning from past events, we can avoid the same mistakes, or possibly even predict the outcome of similar events in the future. Studying Classics gives us a deeper insight into various cultures and philosophies, improving cultural relationships (which in all honesty, could use some strengthening given current times). Classics encompasses so much more than just the languages. It's like history, international education, and philosophy lessons all in one.

For the run-of-the-mill student, choosing Classics as a subject of study can benefit them in numerous ways (ignoring the agonising explanation to virtually anyone who asks). One of them being the boost it gives to studying modern languages, given that they share a large portion of grammar rules and vocabulary. From personal experience, the combination of learning Latin and Spanish simultaneously resulted in it becoming more accessible to learn new concepts, such as the subjunctive mood (even though I'm still trying to wrap my

head around that). Moreover, how many university applicants will have Latin or Greek as a qualification? Cambridge University has even stated 'Employers have a high opinion of Classicists because they are hard-working, articulate, accurate and efficient. They tackle new challenges with ease and are fast learners'. Classics could be the fine line which separates exceptional university candidates from the mediocre. Finally, and possibly most importantly, studying Classics can give us the authority to strut our translating skills with the Latin mottos of schools and institutes. Although slightly pretentious, it does make us feel somewhat like Einstein.

Some may argue that the use of Latin terms and abbreviations in current society is outdated and impractical given that the majority of people don't understand it; however, the reality is quite the contrary as using Latin is firstly much easier to describe clinical terms. For example, 'emphysema' which comes from the Greek "emphusema" would probably be more convenient to use than 'enlargement of air sacs condition'. But more importantly, what modern language would replace it? If terminology differed per each language, it would be tough to communicate between dialects. What many don't realise is that Latin is an impartial way to interconnect anything from all around the globe.

In conclusion, I strongly believe that all schools should offer Classics as a subject choice. It is evident that Classics provides an intellectual boost that other subjects do not, it is still widely used in professions, and it improves one's university application. Although it may seem as though it is outdated and obsolete, Classical languages provide an unbiased medium which unites countries from around the globe. It's more than a subject; it's the chain which links us together through academia, civilisation, and also Harry Potter.

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