

Teaching Antiquity: Perspectives for Disciplinary Didactics

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1. Disciplinary Didactics, General Didactics and Educational Sciences

Didactics is part of Educational Sciences, that complex of disciplines which deals with the phenomenon of education in all of its aspects and which historically developed as a branch of philosophical reflection, assuming the general name of pedagogy. It is still common to call pedagogy a general theory of education. The educational agencies can be more than one society – meant as human environment, family, media, church, and so on. A more and more important role in mass education, so important that it often overshadows the others, is the one assumed in these last two centuries by school, an institution which is responsible for a wide range of functions to which others are constantly added, once accomplished by other institutions.

At school the teacher is a complex figure of educational professional and a specific educational science deals with him: didactics (technique of teaching) which considers the profile, the preparation and the ways in which the teaching activity is realized. Didactics is an autonomous science since it is endowed with a specific epistemology and praxis. Its proper field is the contents survey: organization and curriculum; the languages survey: all those means by which communication takes place in schools (gestures, sounds, writing, image); a methodology of research, since the fulfilment of didactics research correctly provides a theoretic proposal which has to be submitted to control, and this leads to new hypotheses according to the scientific method and degree of accuracy which is the one of social sciences. Also it provides some criteria to justify the results, because didactics proposals have to be inserted in a context, the results have to be the fruit of precise intention, not of chance, and the hypotheses have to be proposed in a problematic way (ie. a way open to many solutions), and not in a unilateral or authoritative way, but in competition with others. From the point of view of praxis, didactics studies the organization of school activities and the planning of educational work, which is the "curriculum" or "planning". The discourse of didactics can be maintained on a general and transversal level; it can deal with that common string of knowledge and abilities

required in every teacher, that string of concepts and that universe of language which allows communication of experiences and team work between specialists of different areas. This is general didactics. But it is well known that a “general” teacher does not exist; there exists a “teacher of”, that is of a subject or a group of subjects. For this reason didactics can affect the formation of teachers only if it becomes disciplinary didactics too – that means if it is able to deal with how to achieve a particular teaching programme with reference to one subject or a group of subjects, paying attention to particular learning and teaching strategies; and with how a subject can contribute, with other disciplines, to the results which are peculiar to the general educational plan.

2. Academic Disciplines and School Subjects: the Dimensions of Disciplinary Didactics

Since every discipline has a particular universe of language, concepts and strategies for problem solution, disciplinary didactics cannot be detached from two aspects which have to be incorporated in it or, at least, considered as relevant: the history of the discipline and the methodology of research. Since we always teach *something* but we always teach *to someone* too, the teacher has to take care of his didactical practice even in general didactics and educational terms. These can be translated into a series of operations which can be defined as “best practices” regarding disciplinary contents. Since the general aim and the objectives deriving from it are not always clear to colleagues or families, the teacher must have relationship and communication skills in order to gain attention and cooperation.

Finally we cannot exclude from the interests of disciplinary didactics a particular pedagogical curvature. For instance, we will try to define the formative role of disciplines defined as humanities; of what the concept “classical” consists; and the role of Latin in linguistic education, not only as formal or formalistic knowledge, but also as a means of liberation and equality between individuals. It will be an issue of didactics and disciplinary reflection to consider the most useful relationship between existential needs, the development phase of the learner and teaching methods, as a means of enlightening the psychological aspects implied in studying Latin. Also as regards the social and

anthropological dimension in which the teaching of this discipline takes place.

3. Five abilities. Latin for Linguistic Education.

The concept of linguistic education has long been recognized and it refers to the so-called four abilities: speaking and listening, reading and writing. I intend to speak briefly about each of them with regard to Latin, and to add a fifth ability, that of translating, so much used in the teaching of Latin that the subject itself is often identified solely with the development of this ability.

Speaking and listening is not possible with a language such as Latin, since a community of speakers using this code does not exist anymore. This community existed until the pre-Roman regional substratums, which interacted with Latin over the course of centuries, ended by creating some linguistic islands not communicating with each other anymore. Two variants of the same idiom can be defined as different only by using a sociolinguistic and pragmatic criterion, clearly not a semantic, morphological or syntactical one. In fact, how could it be denied that Italian, Spanish and French are variants of a common language? What makes them different languages is, for the communities of Italian, Spanish, French speakers, the impossibility of communicating with each other and with Latin. Thus Latin to these languages, and these languages to each other became foreign languages. Since the “sons-languages” completely replaced the mother language, (ie. since the Latin speaking community subdivided into different communities speaking Italian, French, Spanish and so on), it is possible for people belonging to a different language, not Latin, to speak and to listen to these languages as foreign. This is the main reason why listening to and speaking Latin must not and cannot be taught.

But Latin exists as a written language, through a literature and a corpus of inscriptions. If they did not exist, Latin could be restored on the basis of the Romance languages, exactly as we do with Indo-European, (although, as is well known, this is still an hypothesis, authoritatively called into question by some scholars). But in this case it would be a useless instrument and all we could have of Roman civilization would be the archaeological finds. But these would not say much and we could not interpret them as regards their symbolical value if we were lacking in the literary texts. We can think about

the meaning of buildings such as the temple, the forum and the theatre, but without access to literature in Latin there cannot exist a true knowledge and understanding of the Roman world. The archaeological approach, lacking the literary language, can reduce a European and an Italian to the condition of a Japanese in front of the Colosseum. Does this mean that there cannot be any benefit in the audio-oral approach to Latin? I would not say that. Since Latin means Latin literature, I would say that the reading aloud and the listening to texts is very important, in order to recreate the real conditions in which the literary text had its place. Everyone knows about the great astonishment which caught Saint Augustin, at the end of the 4th century, when he found the bishop of Milan, Saint Ambrose, immersed in the silent reading of the Holy Texts. At that time literature was communicated through reading aloud and through the mediation of an interpreter who interposed between the text and the reader (who was actually a listener). This continued, and still continues for texts which are part of liturgy, and in the secular world for written texts with theatrical character. In particular, poetry cannot be perceived in its specifically formal value without recitation, which not only gives colour to discourse but also communicates the rhythm and melodiousness impressed on the text by metrics, both strict and free. If we remove *numeros certos modosque*, as Horatius says, *sermo merus* remains. This has some extremely important consequences on the didactics level. The first is that it is necessary to read Latin, at least poetry, possibly with classical pronunciation. The second is that it is necessary to maintain, if not the melodic nature, or musical pitch of the Latin accent, at least its proper position. The third is that it is necessary to read poetry metrically, not in the sense of using ictus (an intensive-accentuative principle which adds to the quantitative criterion correct to Latin versification), but in the sense of trying to respect the distinction between longs and shorts. This, in fact, is not that difficult; it is sufficient to identify the quantity of open syllables and to stop the voice a bit longer on the long ones. Then, of course, caesura does not mean pause or silent interval, but a regulated division of the distribution of long and short syllables.

The recitation of Latin drama in the original language is strongly recommended. Recitation is desirable for educational reasons which I consider fundamental and which the bourgeois school of the 19th and 20th centuries has little by little abandoned, in

favour of the cerebralism and utilitarianism of education. I refer to the body of culture which was part of the trappings of the gentleman under the Ancien Régime. This consisted of recitation, dance and music, both as passive enjoyment and in playing an instrument. This body of culture was viewed both as a source of pleasure and of recreation; for example, military performances, as in 19th century Prussia-style physical training, or fitness-promotion, as in modern physical training, or agonistic performances as in modern competitive sport, or idolization of image, as in that voyeuristic body-fitness which is so popular nowadays. A good idea might be to combine reading of Latin texts with listening to their translation, followed by listening to the Latin text without the written text or the translation.

Let us now consider two abilities which are peculiar to written language: reading and writing. In what sense can these abilities be developed as regards Latin? As primary teachers know well, reading ability can be both the ability to decipher the graphic symbols and to understand the content of the text that is read. In the case of Latin, reading ability, in the first sense, is scarcely developed, since the usual practice is always limited to silent reading. In the second sense, the reading of Latin as comprehension of the text does not even exist, since it always follows translation: nobody is able to read a Latin text without having translated it before or without using a translation with parallel text. When a student is instructed to "read and translate", actually he is asked to recite an already read text and to remember an already done translation. How can this discouraging situation be avoided? I think something can be done. One of the main constraints of Latin education is the apportionment of texts; usually a complete work is not read and texts are always coupled with translations and with notes. Reading Latin differs from the common experience, not only of secondary school students but also of graduate students and even university professors, of facing the extended text of a same author without interruption. This experience is highly instructive, indeed, and can be offered as a typically adolescent and paradoxical challenge. For instance, we can invite (not require!) the reading in Latin of the whole *Aeneid*, or at least of a big part of it; of a couple of Plautus' comedies; Catullus' *carmina* to Lesbia; the *Satyricon* or the *Asinus Aureus*. In my opinion it is in this way that Latin can be truly learnt. It is necessary to spend time on immersing oneself

in the work. This approach is valid also for Latin teachers. Personally, I did something of this nature during my military service; forced into a long period of isolation, without other books and with much time at my disposal, I read all the *Aeneid* in Latin. Only after that did I start feeling like a Latin scholar – and I had already graduated and was a permanent assistant lecturer!

Finally, let us consider writing. It can be meant in two senses too: the technical ability of drawing signs and that of composing a text. In my opinion both these abilities must be trained, since the habit of using printed or copied texts gives little practice of writing in Latin and to little attention towards the words actually in the text, attention which is necessary to understand the text itself. In fact I realized frequently translations are unsuccessful because the text is not correctly read and transcribed. It would be useful to practise dictation from Latin, as it is practised with Italian and foreign languages. Writing in the second sense does not mean composing a text in classical language from nothing, but to use again the material offered by the text in order to sum up it in Latin. This exercise will clearly be less difficult if one is used to summing up a Latin text in Italian, and if the summing up in Latin is guided by proper questions about the content.

But how is it possible to insert translation as a fifth ability in the development of linguistic abilities? Translation must be meant as something more, by which two linguistic codes, language one and language two, are compared. Comprehension of texts is favoured by all the methods previously suggested, and only in their context can be placed reflection upon grammar and its respective set of exercises which, for the most part, will not be translation exercises, but analysis, especially analysis of the structure of a sentence. Here is useful the visualization of valence grammar with its trees and the visualization of text structure, which has to be invented mainly through the use of multimedia instruments. Translation assumes, but also favours, comprehension and should have as its main aim not the checking of text comprehension, but the checking of competence in using the native language. Comprehension helps the development of problem solving; some define it as the most useful activity of problem solving in schools, often superior to the one required by mathematics. Translation is Latin's contribution to linguistic education in the native language.