

Untextbooking for the CI Latin class: why and how to begin

by Rachel Ash

When I first dreamed about leaving my textbook behind in any serious manner, the thought was spurred by a post authored by Audrey Watters in her blog *Hack Education*, ‘Hacking the Textbook (Open).’ In her post, Watters describes an event in which teachers are trained to create, cultivate, and collectively share their own curriculum content.¹ I had already spent years modifying my textbook to make it work with the way I teach, and while I still believe that it is the best textbook for a Comprehensible Input-based class, I found myself struggling more and more against the book the further students progressed just to maintain a semblance of comprehensibility. Whether or not the text was compelling—another pillar of Comprehensible Input—was not even a concern at that point.

I responded with my normal *modus operandi*: research. I read the few blogs I could find of other teachers trying things out without textbooks, researched modes of information storage and sharing, and looked at the resources available to me as a Latin teacher who is only willing to take away the textbook if I can provide something more worthy of my students’ attention. Untextbooking was—and is—a huge undertaking. It is not something to venture into blindly. Only the import of providing my students with a Comprehensible Input-centred curriculum gave me the impetus needed to take that step.

Comprehensible Input: The Three Pillars on Which My Instruction is Built²

One of the more controversial approaches to language teaching, Comprehensible Input (CI) still consistently proves successful in both qualitative and quantitative research.³ Built upon decades of research and continuing to evolve with new research findings, CI is the one approach that has shown regular gains for students from multiple socio-economic backgrounds and scholastic aptitudes. Because it creates a fair learning space for all students, my classes have been built upon the three pillars of Comprehensible Input for 15 years.

The three pillars (or ‘three C’s’ as they’ve come to be called) of a CI-based classroom are: comprehensible, compelling, and caring instruction. Stephen Krashen founded Comprehensible Input Theory on six hypotheses about language learning, which in turn created the foundation for current Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research.⁴ The three C’s are a concise summary of those hypotheses.⁵

The first pillar, comprehensible, is arguably the most important. First introduced by Krashen as a *sine qua non* prerequisite of language acquisition, the Comprehension Hypothesis ‘states that we acquire language and develop literacy

when we understand messages, that is, when we understand what we hear and what we read, when we receive “comprehensible input,”’ (Krashen, 2009, p. 81). Bill VanPatten, a leader in Second Language Acquisition research, underlines this point, ‘an internal grammar [i.e., a mental map of a language] is built up via exposure to comprehensible, communicatively oriented input—a position that is unquestioned in the field of SLA after four decades of research’ (VanPatten, 2003, p. 418). Without comprehensible messages in the target language, students cannot and will not progress in that language. This is the oldest and most established rule for creating a CI-based class and curriculum: students must understand what they are hearing and reading, and they must be provided with ample opportunities to hear and read understandable language. There have been many prescribed approaches to providing these opportunities; however, there is no right or wrong way as long as the messages are understandable and the other two pillars of CI are also met.

The second pillar of Comprehensible Input is compelling. In his paper ‘The Compelling (not just interesting) Input Hypothesis’ Krashen defines compelling input as ‘so interesting you forget that it is in another language’ (Krashen, 2011, p. 1). He explains that in order for students to ‘pay attention to input, it should be interesting’. Krashen later continues to make his strongest assertion, ‘It is

possible that compelling input is not just optimal: it may be the only way we truly acquire language’.

Students not only require understandable messages in order to learn language; they require access to interesting and compelling messages, stories that are relevant to them. ‘Teachers lose credibility with students when they ignore the cultural trends and issues that interest them and instead design classroom reading instruction around books that are “good for you”; as a result, students stop listening and paying attention, giving only the bare minimum effort they have to in order to pass the class (Miller, 2009, p. 85). Students need something that brings them back, inspires them, and causes them to want to find out more. This is compelling input and this will lead to students who learn not only while they are in the classroom, but even outside the classroom.

The third and final pillar of Comprehensible Input, caring, can be closely tied to compelling. This ‘C’ encompasses a wide range of student needs for success: low anxiety and high self-esteem (cited by Krashen as important variables; cf. 2009, p. 81), perceived relevance and visibility within the target curriculum, and even simply the students’ relationship with the teacher: ‘the best classroom teachers develop ways to make the classroom feel like a family that has its own distinct rules, ways of speaking, and power dynamics’ (Emdin, 2016, p. 60).

Creating a caring environment for your CI-based classes means building trust with your students; it also means they are more receptive to the messages you deliver in the language you are teaching. No matter how comprehensible or compelling the material is when a student receives it, if the student does not feel valued, the student is less likely to retain the lesson. However, ‘creating a culture that is caring... reduces anxiety in students, and the resulting low-stress environment increases language acquisition’ (Ash, 2018, p. 73).

All three pillars are essential to creating a classroom that is best suited to language acquisition for all kinds of students. When a teacher inspires students’ imaginations, makes them believe they are capable, and shows them that she truly values their presence in her class, students on the whole improve.

This is why I have chosen to base my classes on Comprehensible Input theory for 15 years now, despite my struggles to incorporate this teaching philosophy with the materials I’ve been expected to use in the past.

Everything a Textbook Does Not Provide

After ten years struggling to come to terms with my dissatisfaction, I finally admitted that the textbook could not provide me with the things I had grown to require for a successful class and curriculum. Namely, I wanted a textbook that would allow me to create a curriculum that was comprehensible, compelling, and caring, and no textbook currently exists for Latin that provides these things.

One of the first steps to ensuring a comprehensible curriculum is limiting vocabulary; ‘the Comprehension Hypothesis predicts that language acquisition will proceed more rapidly if input is “narrow,” that is, if acquirers obtain a great deal of input in a narrow range of subjects and gradually expand’ (Krashen, 2004, p. 27). This is never the case in any textbook; all textbooks give a great deal of new vocabulary in each chapter, some of which is never repeated again in the text, and a surprising amount of which is not even high-frequency vocabulary (vocabulary students might find in the passages they will be expected to read if they continue on with Latin past these textbook curricula).

Instead of limiting vocabulary, grammar is carefully guarded, monitored, and graded in Latin textbooks. Even reading-focused textbooks still centre their curricula around building grammar knowledge and skills; all of their readings are careful to introduce new grammar slowly while inundating students with numerous unknown vocabulary words. However, research in Second Language Acquisition tells us ‘there are sequences or “stages” in the developments of particular structures. That is, certain features of the language seem to appear relatively early in a learner’s language while others are acquired much later’ (Lightbown, 1993, p. 57). The stages of language acquisition for second languages have been found to be fixed, no matter

the order in which grammatical structures are taught; organising a curriculum around grammar instruction is not found to be conducive to long-term retention. VanPatten affirms that teaching grammatical rules cannot help a brain access them subconsciously, ‘explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge are fundamentally different things... explicit knowledge (i.e., explicit “rules”) cannot turn into implicit knowledge, or what I call “mental representation”’ (VanPatten, 2016, p. 651).⁶ What VanPatten refers to as ‘mental representation’ is the language learner’s inherent linguistic knowledge. His point is that this knowledge cannot be taught by memorising rules, thus those rules will not move into long-term memory.

Additionally, a focus on grammatical rules can cause a high degree of anxiety and self-consciousness among language learners:

Experience has also shown that primarily or exclusively grammar-based approaches to teaching do *not* guarantee that learners develop high levels of accuracy and linguistic knowledge. In fact, it is often very difficult to determine what such learners know about the target language; the classroom emphasis of accuracy usually results in learners who are inhibited and will not “take chances” in using their knowledge for communication (Lightbown, 1993, p. 81).

When students will not even demonstrate their knowledge for fear of making mistakes, their anxiety has begun to actively impede their language learning. Time spent teaching or even time structured around grammatical rules is time, for me, better expended on intriguing and comprehensible stories.

Inside or outside of the classroom, stories appeal to human beings. Stories ‘more readily garner and hold readers’/ listeners’ attention. They more readily create meaning and understanding in a reader’s/ listener’s mind. Stories are remembered better and are more accurately recalled from memory’ (Haven, 2007, p. 5). According to the Compelling Hypothesis, ‘language acquisition occurs most efficiently when the message is so compelling that the acquirer is not even aware that it is being delivered in another

language' and stories are a perfect means to that end (Krashen, 2015, p. 34). Because 'information delivered in story structure is easier for readers and listeners to comprehend—especially when the topic of information is unfamiliar to the receiver' stories make language learning interesting and enjoyable for students, while also making it more comprehensible (Haven, 2007, p. 97). Compelling input is often what keeps students returning to a program from year to year, and retention is important; Krashen makes what seems like a controversial claim when he further states 'motivation plays no role in successful language acquisition' (Krashen, 2015, p. 34). Yet, when that statement is compared to a much earlier description of motivation in the language classroom, his meaning becomes much clearer:

If learners need to speak the second language in a wide range of social situations or to fulfill professional ambitions, they will perceive the communicative value of the second language and therefore be motivated to acquire proficiency in it ... If the speaker's only reason for learning the second language is external pressure, internal motivation may be minimal and general attitudes towards learning may be negative (Lightbown, 1993, p. 40).

Krashen is saying that we cannot depend on motivation to cause our students to learn. Students will not learn a language because we tell them it is important or necessary or will help them. Lightbown (1993) delineates many internal motivating factors above, in fact, none of which apply to Latin. If the only motivating factors that exist for Latin are external, and that has been shown to have a weak influence on student achievement, we cannot and must not depend on external motivation to promote our subject.

I am left with requiring compelling stories and compelling input for my students, both of which are minimal in textbooks. At best, the one textbook in which I found the most success could maintain a level of compelling material for half of the class for around one semester before interest waned and only those students who are always successful continued to care about the story and the characters. Contrasted with this, the

power of compelling material cannot be matched. When students are fully engaged in class and invested in the material, 'their curiosity about the content is awakened, and they are constantly exploring the connections between the context and the content that the teacher identified and brought to the classroom... they begin asking questions that go beyond the scope of the traditional lesson' (Emdin, 2016, p. 145). Students and teachers can join each other in mutual interests in the classroom and avoid the struggle that can result when students are not interested in the content the teacher is providing.

Textbooks also require severe adaptation in order to fulfill the third 'C', caring. This is universal. Some conditions for caring are only in my own power: the atmosphere I create in my classroom, whether I take the time to know my students and show them that I value their presence in my classes. Unfortunately, after I put in this effort to make my class welcoming to all, Latin textbooks repeatedly show them a whitewashed, Eurocentric view of Rome.

Adrienne Rich famously wrote 'when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing' (Rich, 1984, p. 199). Every time I show my students a purely European Rome, I am offering 70% of them an empty mirror.

Let us set aside, for the moment, whether or not I should base my level of representation on the diversity of my students. The truth is, the Roman Empire was a multicultural empire:

The Roman practice of incorporating non-Roman peoples as citizens — both the descendants of freed slaves and people of other ethnic groups in the provinces — over the course of most of their history also reflects a tradition of not basing Roman identity on a concept of racial or ethnic purity. You could be a Roman and be Greek, Syrian, Judean, Gallic, German, Spanish, Numidian, Nubian, Ethiopian, Egyptian, and more. While Romans wrote a lot about non-Roman peoples, what constituted a Roman per se was never defined as a single ethnic group — foreigners could become

'Roman'. Places could 'become' Roman, too, through engineered environments. This doesn't mean Romans did not have prejudices, it just means those prejudices didn't impact whether one was or was not or could become a Roman (Kennedy, 2017).

There is no reason students should not see themselves reflected in the Romans we teach about in our classes; the Romans contained multiple cultures from all around the Mediterranean and incorporated them into their empire as citizens. There are many African and Persian historical figures in the history and literature that we teach in our Latin classes and textbooks, 'yet how many of us use textbooks or images that depict all of these people as white?... Our students need to see themselves in the content we choose, in order to feel included' (Bracey, 2017).

Instead of offering a diverse Rome rich in many different cultures, 'it is easy for even the most well-intentioned Latin teacher to inadvertently alienate students of colour—for example, by centring a course around a textbook that speaks glowingly about how much Roman occupation improved the lives of their subjects and also contains no images of people of colour' (Bracey, 2017). For some of my students, colonialism is a difficult and personal topic, and cultural erasure is an actual fear that at least half of them face at home.

Furthermore, whether or not Rome was diverse, the necessity of representation still would apply. Students are often marginalised in the media, in social encounters, sometimes even in their own families. The classroom can become a safe space for them; just by 'including themes and activities that represent students' interest, abilities, and backgrounds is a principal method of affirming your students' identities' (Glynn, 2018, p. 96). This includes racial and ethnic identities as well as 'learning or physical disabilities, religion, sexuality, or another element related to their identity' (Glynn, 2018, p. 78). Offering students a mirror in your classroom that reflects them creates a caring environment, and helps them invest themselves in the language you are teaching. Often teachers underestimate the 'need for students to engage emotionally in order to learn from

someone or something' (Emdin, 2016, p. 34).

In sum I have put together a list of four requirements for my CI-based classes that textbooks are not fulfilling:

1. Limited, frequently occurring vocabulary. I want my students exposed to useful vocabulary words which will aid them when they continue Latin beyond my classes and I want them exposed to those words often enough in my own classes that they know what they mean without thinking about them. This means fewer words, but words of high frequency in Latin literature.
2. A curriculum that does not shelter grammar. I want my students exposed to grammar as it is needed for our stories, as it falls naturally, with the understanding that they will get it when they get it and will ask questions when they are ready to learn about it. I will not drill forms, and will give them access to grammars for editing purposes in upper levels.
3. Truly compelling material. Input that really interests my students. Sometimes this will be self-selected and sometimes this will be selected by me based on interests they have shown in class. Sometimes we will vote. Material will be selected for its ability to capture and maintain student imagination.
4. Representation. My students must see themselves in the things we read and discuss in class. They must see themselves in the imagery I project.

To this date, no textbook offers these requirements. This is why I left the textbook behind, and why I continue to untextbook to this day.

A Comprehensible Approach to Untextbooking

Untextbooking is both exhilarating and daunting. The freedom of designing your own curriculum comes with the responsibility of designing your own curriculum, plus the work involved in researching resources for said curriculum, then creating meaningful classroom tasks

and activities for these resources, all the while making sure that what you are doing adheres to the very rules and requirements that caused you to stop using textbooks in the first place.

I will not mislead you into thinking this is easy. It is extremely hard work. It is late nights, assessment, self-assessment, research, and cross-examination of your creations. It is checking your ego at the door because something you poured your heart and soul into, sure your students would love it as much as you do, was met with lukewarm feelings or even sarcasm. Untextbooking is teaching, but with even more of yourself invested into it. It is, though, also significantly more rewarding once you master the process and start finding success.

I find there are four stages to creating a unit in an Untextbooked curriculum.

1. Choose the unit theme. There are several approaches to this. In first year Latin, I will of course choose the theme for my students because they do not yet know what is available to them in the wide Roman, Greek, and Mediterranean world. By their second year, I allow classes to vote on themes. Important considerations:
 - a. Choose themes that you are personally interested in. Both teacher and students should find the subject matter compelling.
 - b. Choose themes for which you are certain you can find interesting Latin readings. You need not be limited to Classical-era readings, but you should be sure readings exist. Do not be afraid to use upper-level texts if you think they will be especially compelling. I used *Harry Potter* for one of my texts, which is extremely difficult, but adapted it for my students' levels.
 - c. If possible, choose themes in which you have experience. The less experience you have in the theme, the more effort you will expend in creating materials. That does not always prevent me from offering themes, and some of my most rewarding teaching experiences have come from themes I entered into with little or no previous knowledge. In exchange for a topic both I and my students found extremely compelling, I spent every night working late to stay, on

average, one or two days ahead of my students.

2. Once you have a theme chosen, choose readings for that theme. As much as possible, base them on your students' capabilities and current knowledge. Considerations:
 - a. If you can, choose readings that keep vocabulary close to what students already know. Particularly in lower levels it can be useful to choose simple stories and Latin novellas (which usually try to keep their unique word count low; check to see what they have listed) to control the flow of new vocabulary.
 - b. There is a surprising amount of free Latin online. Much Mediaeval and Neo-Latin (Latin written between 1400-1900) is available free online, and Classical Latin is available in multiple forms. It can be very valuable to explore the same topic in multiple centuries and cultures.
 - c. You have the ability, when choosing your readings, to incorporate your students' voices and their experiences. Think outside the city of Rome.
3. For each reading, you will choose vocabulary for focus and vocabulary for glossing (defining within the text). The vocabulary you choose for focus is the vocabulary you will expect students to acquire. The glossed vocabulary helps clarify the reading, but it is not intended for acquisition. Considerations:
 - a. If you have complete freedom over which vocabulary to choose, this can seem like an impossible task. I recommend choosing a frequency list for guidance. I personally prefer Dickinson College Commentaries' *Latin Core Vocabulary Frequency List*; it is a list of 997 words ranked by frequency in the most common Classical corpora.
 - b. If you have been given a prescribed list of vocabulary words with scheduled deadlines, then I recommend cross-referencing those words with the readings you are researching for your theme. This means steps two and three will most likely happen at the same time; you will be choosing readings

that flow with the mandated vocabulary.

- c. If you are very concerned about a grammatical form being confusing for students (e.g., *mibi fugiendum est* vs. *fugio*), teach it as a vocabulary item rather than avoiding the reading or removing it from the passage. Limit vocabulary, not grammar. Student brains are flexible, and those vocabulary items are helpful when they encounter the same structure later.

4. Once steps one through three have been completed, it is entirely possible to assemble the rest of the lessons for your unit comfortably. The curriculum at this point has everything a textbook would normally provide: a unit topic, readings, and vocabulary. You should plan activities that emphasise repeated use of focus vocabulary, reading, and discussion of the texts.

To clarify these steps a little further, I am offering a subunit (found here: <https://tinyurl.com/subunit711>). I will dismantle the reading in the unit to reveal the details behind step three in specific.

Two years ago, my students chose to study a unit on 'Fantastical Beasts', a unit that I had offered because of my great comfort with Pliny the Elder as well as several other resources I had in mind (such as Virgil's description of *Fama* in the *Aeneid*). To shock my students out of their expectation that all of Pliny's stories would be about monsters, I selected a passage from book seven, which is dedicated to mankind, and I dissected the description of the men from Abarimon in 7.11 to decide what vocabulary I needed to teach my students so they could read the story and comprehend it.

The excerpt I chose contains 51 words. Among those words, four are proper nouns; two are compound words containing a word my students did know (I simply underlined the familiar root and left my students to work it out as we had been practising in class); and 17 words were unfamiliar to my students.

Those 17 words are: *quidam*, *convallis*, *regio*, *silvestris*, *aversis plantis* (two words, used as one phrase), *eximius*, *passim*, *ferus*, *vagari*, *spirare*, *ideo*, *finitimus*, *mentor*, *iter*, *eius*, *prodere*. Comparing these words to my preferred frequency list, I find nine of the words on the list: *quidam*, *regio*, *ferus*, *vagari*,

spirare, *ideo*, *iter*, *eius*, *prodere*. I chose to reduce the list to eight, due to the low listing of *prodere* (929th on the frequency list), and thus found the words I focused on for this reading. The rest (*convallis*, *silvestris*, *aversis plantis*, *eximius*, *passim*, *finitimus*, *mentor*, and *prodere*) were defined for my students in the reading, though they were repeated enough throughout the lesson on Pliny's passage that most of my students acquired many of them unintentionally.

From there I created the rest of the subunit you can find at the url listed above. For the purposes of this paper, I do not have the luxury of detailing the means that an experienced teacher of Comprehensible Input might structure the remaining activities to best support students' comprehension of the text, keep interest high, and maintain low anxiety—thus fulfilling all three pillars of CI. I can offer the list of online resources that I and Miriam Patrick keep curated (<https://tinyurl.com/latciblogs>), which includes research resources as well as teaching blogs filled with short and long Comprehensible Input-based activities.

Untextbooking, like Comprehensible Input, does not have to be one single change, undertaken in one great effort. Any teacher considering teaching outside the textbook should begin small; try one level at a time, or one unit, and use a textbook of choice as needed for support. Teachers are often overextended, and I myself have seen great teachers take on great ideas only to be burned out because of the energy it required to maintain these ideas.

For any teacher who chooses to Untextbook multiple levels at the same time, I recommend teaching the same thematic units across the levels of Latin, but adjusting the difficulty according to the students' needs. This can reduce the effort expended on research and materials, and maintaining the same subject matter throughout the day helps promote focus and knowledge of that particular information.

My final thoughts to offer are simply this: we do this for our students. Let them know you are trying a grand experiment and want to give them some say in what they learn. You are sharing with them 'the responsibility for structuring the class' and need them to help you be successful (Savignon, 1983, p. 138). You will be surprised how well your students will rise

to the challenge of deserving your trust, and how hard they will work to make sure that, even through some failures, your efforts succeed.

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¹Watters also inspired me to imagine what was possible with her post 'Beyond the Textbook', in which she describes what she would like to see in the next generation of 'digital textbooks', which, unfortunately, more often than not, tend to be just glorified digital versions of the texts. However, both of these articles started me on a path of considering whether my textbook really was offering what I needed and what it potentially could or should offer, considering the resources that are now available technologically and online.

²This is a rather cursory overview of Comprehensible Input Theory. I explored it much more thoroughly in my article 'The MovieTalk: A Practical Application of Comprehensible Input Theory' p. 71-74.

³Rather than list all the resources here, which constitute a separate article in themselves, I will refer you to an article written by Stephen Krashen that lists several resources and studies

in the interest of brevity. This is by no means comprehensive, but it is offered here as a sample of the more recent research over CI available from the last forty years: 'The Case for Comprehensible Input', which can be found in the online journal *language magazine*, <https://www.languagemagazine.com/2017/07/17/case-for-comprehension/>

⁴Again, to save time, I will not enter into a discussion of all six hypotheses here. Robert Patrick details all six in his article 'Making Sense of Comprehensible Input in the Latin Classroom' p. 110-111. My own summation: 'These hypotheses suggest long-term language acquisition only occurs as a result of much repetition of interesting content at a comprehensible level in an unstressful environment and that focus on grammatical rules prevents acquisition' (Ash, 2018, p. 71).

⁵I originally coined the three C's as a concept and wrote about them in my article 'The MovieTalk: A Practical Application of Comprehensible Input Theory' in which I add the third 'C', Caring.

⁶VanPatten's article, 'Why Explicit Knowledge Cannot Become Implicit Knowledge', is a fascinating, quick read and clarifies the unique way language maps itself into the mind. It is worth perusal if you are interested in understanding his claim.