

# Comprehensible Input FAQs

by Keith Rogers

Many teachers in the UK are aware of the issues surrounding a grammar-translation approach to teaching the classical languages but do not see any alternatives. One of the purposes of this edition of the *Journal of Classics Teaching* is to offer a series of articles which provides an overview of an approach called Comprehensible Input. This brief article has been written to provide an introduction to some of the basic questions and point the reader towards the relevant articles.

What is the acronym for Comprehensible Input?

CI

Why should I be interested in CI?

One reason would be if you want your students to be able to read Latin/Greek. Whilst grammar-translation focuses on learning about the language and provides students with decoding tools, CI puts the emphasis on language acquisition and produces students who can read rather than decode. Read Andrew Olimpi's article on extensive versus intensive reading (Olimpi, 2019) and Kevin Ballestrini and Lindsay Sear's article on reading proficiency (Sears & Ballestrini, 2019) to learn more.

Any other reasons?

If you want to make Latin/Greek accessible to all and, as a result, want to have a thriving Classics department with increased uptake then you should consider CI as the way forward. See Robert Patrick's article (Patrick, R., 2019) for an example of a thriving department.

Is accessibility to Latin a problem in the UK?

Yes. A study by the Cambridge School Classics Project (CSCP, 2015) concluded the following:

*97% of candidates for the current OCR Latin GCSE appear to be in the top third of the national ability range. There is considerable evidence to suggest that the qualification fails to adequately provide access for the wider ability range.*

Why the need to increase uptake?

The number of students sitting GCSE Latin has fallen by approximately 50,000 in 50 years. A study by the Cambridge School Classics Project (CSCP 2015) concluded the following:

*The average GCSE class size in non-selective state schools is 13. Unless changes are made to the current proposals, 53% of existing Latin departments in non-selective state schools will either close or decline.*

Anything else?

It's fun and effective! Liam Printer, a teacher who uses CI, summarises his reasons on his website <https://www.liamprinter.com> as follows:

*Ease: Less time photocopying, more time teaching.*

*Laughter: 'it's so fun'; I laugh with my students every day.*

*Evidence-based: it works.*

So, what is CI?

Comprehensible Input is the term used to describe various practices that emerge from the theoretical works of Stephen Krashen, his predecessors and some of his successors (though he is still alive and teaching). The short definition has two parts to it. 1) We know that human beings acquire language when they receive understandable messages in that language. Given this observation: 2) The focus of the teacher is to deliver understandable messages in Latin as often as possible in as many different ways as possible (LBP, 2019).

Acquisition?

Language is acquired through CI. It is an unconscious process; it happens when the learner is focused on the meaning of the message rather than the language.

### Who is Stephen Krashen?

Stephen Krashen has worked in the field of Second Language Acquisition and published his work *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning* in 1981 (Krashen, 1981). He has published all his work online. An overview of his work and its relation to Latin teaching is given in Robert Patrick's article which is an excellent starting point (Patrick, R., 2019).

### Why Krashen?

It should be noted that there are other Second Language Acquisition theories out there but Krashen's work has been adopted by the teaching community, applied and tested over the last 30+ years. Krashen himself has kept in touch with the application of his theory and has been a vocal spokesman on the topic of bilingualism.

### What is TPRS?

TPRS stands for Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling.

### Is TPRS the same as CI?

Krashen's theory has been taken up and presented in many forms. TPRS is one approach which has enjoyed much success in the classroom. A teacher called Blaine Ray adapted Krashen's theory in the 1980s to create TPRS. John Bracey has written a guide to some of the basics of TPRS (Bracey, 2019).

### How are stories involved?

Story-Asking is a cornerstone practice of TPRS. The process consists of creating a story in collaboration with students. The teacher asks students for suggestions about plot points and characters and the result is a unique and personalised story, which can be used as reading material. See John Bracey's article for more details (Bracey, 2019).

### How do you check that the stories are comprehensible?

One of the ways to check that the stories are comprehensible is to require the

students to give oral feedback as the stories are told. It should be stressed that teachers undertake the majority of speaking in order to provide input and it is important that a stress-free environment is maintained. Michelle Ramahlo's article on starting to teach using CI gives some examples of 'circling' (Ramahlo, 2019) and Bracey gives more details in his article (Bracey, 2019).

### Can any story be used?

There are structures which are adhered to by CI teachers and all is explained in Bracey's article (Bracey, 2019) but the key point is that your story should be both comprehensible and compelling.

### Compelling?

Krashen defines compelling input as 'so interesting you forget that it is in another language'. In this way students focus on the story and not on the language.

### Is it like immersion in MFL classes?

No, as students are expected to understand every message.

### How much of the class is conducted in the target language?

The more input which the students receive, the better so some CI teachers aim to conduct 90% of the class in the target language.

### So, are students being taught to speak?

No, the focus in the world of Classics teaching is on reading (not decoding). Andrew Olimpi provides an article on the difference between extensive and intensive reading (Olimpi, 2019). Students are often providing one-word answers simply in order to check understanding. According to Krashen output comes much later in the process.

### So why use spoken Latin or Greek?

Repetition of vocabulary and language structures helps with language acquisition.

Paula Saffire writes, 'In terms of quantity alone, it is possible to present an extraordinary amount of ancient Greek in a short time by speaking. Reading, on the other hand, is very slow in the beginning. . . . . A two-minute interchange from the fourth day of my beginning Greek class is transcribed later in this chapter. During those two minutes, 155 Greek words (based on 13 lexical entries) were used by teacher and students, 149 correctly. . . . Imagine how many Greek words could be read in two minutes by the fourth day of class. Considerably less!' (Gruber-Miller, 2006, p. 163).

### Does the repetition not become boring?

CI teachers learn to avoid this by using 'circling' carefully and by balancing it with PQA which focuses the content of conversation and the topics of stories around students, their ideas and their interests and therefore nearly guarantees compelling input.

### What is PQA and how does it fit into the story asking?

Personalised Questions and Answers (PQA) is nothing more than a simple conversation about the students in the room. The teacher asks questions and students mostly give one- or two-word answers. The key to this technique is to remember that the goal, as always, is to provide compelling comprehensible input. John Bracey explains all in his article (Bracey, 2019).

### Is CI all about story asking?

No, whilst story asking is a very successful strategy and much loved by teachers and students, there are many other ways of providing compelling comprehensible input. Lance Piantaggini provides an excellent overview in his article on Input-based activities (Piantaggini, 2019).

### Is it all about spoken Latin?

No. Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) is also a key component to the CI classroom and Miriam Patrick has written an excellent article on developing FVR for your students (Patrick, M., 2019).

### What is FVR?

Free Voluntary Reading. Krashen recommends 'FVR...reading because you want to'. Students should have scheduled FVR time in the CI classroom. The books focus on providing engaging stories but sheltering vocabulary. Miriam Patrick writes on how to implement FVR in the classroom (Patrick, M. 2019).

### What is the level of the books?

Krashen's theory states that language acquisition requires easy reading in the target language and levels lower than the students currently work in. There is therefore a need for some very easy readers in the early years with a restricted vocabulary.

### Do such readers exist?

Many such texts now exist through the efforts of CI teachers. Miriam Patrick's article provides some links to these texts in the references section (Patrick, M. 2019).

### What about writing in the target language?

Writing is output so is obviously not the focus of lessons in a CI classroom but students do write up some stories partly to check comprehension, use of language and vocabulary retention. A forthcoming article will be on the role of writing in the CI classroom.

### How are the stories made comprehensible?

Vocabulary is taught in advance and various techniques are used such as images, acting or the drawing-up of stories alongside the oral checking of understanding. There is also an emphasis on sheltering vocabulary so that students have met all the words.

### Can I use my existing textbook (CLC, OLC, *Ecce Romani*) to teach using CI?

Not easily. There are reasons why the stories may not fit easily for story asking and the number of new words per story is

generally too high. Some *CLC* stories have been adapted by CI teachers by cutting down the vocabulary.

### So, are there CI textbooks?

No. CI teachers tend to create resources which are both comprehensible and compelling. Krashen emphasises the need for input to be compelling. Rachel Ash writes on the topic of un-textbooking (Ash 2019).

### Are grammar and syntax limited in the stories too?

CI teachers seek to introduce a new element of language with each story following a principle which Krashen labels 'natural order'. Robert Patrick's article on the topic explains 'natural order' (Patrick, R., 2019) and why one precept of CI teaching is 'Shelter the vocabulary but not the grammar'.

### Is grammar still taught?

Yes, but in pop-up sessions. Formal grammar teaching is highly ineffective for language acquisition. An article on grammar in the CI classroom will appear in a future edition of this journal.

### Given that the vocabulary is limited, how do students make the jump to reading set texts?

Kevin Ballestrini and Lindsay Sears give a step-by-step guide in their article to using tiered reading to approach authentic Latin passages with greater facility (Sears & Ballestrini, 2019).

### How is culture taught?

Some CI teachers create simple readings on the cultural topic in the target language so that students continue to acquire language in this part of the class.

### Is the CI classroom less structured?

No. John Piazza writes on techniques to implement CI-based practices within the

successful frameworks that teachers have already established (Piazza, 2019).

### Are there CI courses?

The best introduction for many teachers is to attend a CI/TPRS course. Normally you are placed in the role of a student so you can see how effective the approach is as you learn a new language for the day. Michelle Ramahlo writes of her experience and lists some organisations offering training sessions (Ramahlo, 2019). Another approach is to observe a CI/TPRS teacher.

### Do I need to be able to speak Latin/Greek fluently?

No. There are now more summer schools offering the opportunity to practise your spoken Latin as well as groups which meet on a regular basis to speak in Latin but many teachers start teaching using CI with a script in hand.

### Is there much support for teachers?

Michelle Ramahlo's article lists resources and groups which will prove invaluable for the teacher starting out with CI (Ramahlo, 2019).

**Keith Rogers, Lewes Old Grammar School,  
RogersK@logs.uk.com**

## References

- Ash, R. (2019). Untextbooking for the CI Latin Class: Why and How to Begin. *Journal of Classics Teaching*, **39**.
- Bracey, J. (2019). TPRS, PQA & Circling. *Journal of Classics Teaching*, **39**.
- Cambridge School Classics Project. (2015). Who is Latin for? Access to KS4 Latin qualifications. An investigation into the viability of the DfE's proposed Ancient languages GCSE subject content (April 2014). <https://www.exams.cambridgescp.com/files/ks4qualsresearch2015.pdf>
- Gruber-Miller, J. (2006). *When Dead Tongues Speak: Teaching Beginning Greek and Latin*, Oxford University Press, 2006.

Krashen, S. <http://www.sdkrashen.com/>

Krashen, S. (1981). Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning

Latin Best Practices (2019) What is CI?  
[latin-bestpractices@yahoo.groups.com](mailto:latin-bestpractices@yahoo.groups.com)

Olimpi, A. (2019). Legere Discitur Legendo: Extensive Reading in the Latin Classroom. *Journal of Classics Teaching*, **39**.

Patrick, M. (2019). Free Voluntary Reading and Comprehensible Input. *Journal of Classics Teaching*, **39**.

Patrick, R. (2019). Comprehensible Input and Krashen's Theory. *Journal of Classics Teaching*, **39**.

Piantaggini, L. (2019). Input-Based Activities, *Journal of Classics Teaching*, **39**.

Piazza, J. (2019) Structuring CI-Based Practices for Success. *Journal of Classics Teaching*, **39**.

Ramahlo, M. (2019). On Starting to Teach Using CI. *Journal of Classics Teaching*, **39**.

Sears, L and Ballestrini, K. (2019). Adapting Antiquity: Using Tiered Texts to Increase Latin Reading Proficiency. *Journal of Classics Teaching*, **39**.