

“What’s the point of studying Latin?”

Comments like this have echoed down the centuries as children discard Kennedy’s Revised Latin Primer or give up on a tricky passage in Virgil’s Aeneid. Janita Clamp investigates why Latin still has a place in the curriculum



There’s no doubt that Latin is hard – and even if you do persevere with it, what practical use does it have? There’s not even the satisfaction of using it to book a room or order a beer (or at least not until the Vatican opens a hotel).

For a dead language, Latin has had quite a grip on Western culture and education. For centuries it was the common language of religion and scholarship, and it remained a requirement for studying medicine and law at British universities until as late as the 1960s.

That grip has loosened considerably. These days you don’t need to have studied Latin at school to embark on a classics degree, so long as candidates demonstrate keen interest in the subject and an aptitude for languages. The University of Cambridge offers a three-year degree for those with a Latin A level and a four-year degree for those who haven’t studied it before. The University of Oxford’s website tells prospective students: “We are perfectly happy for you to apply without a single word of Latin or Greek.” Both universities offer summer schools for students who are thinking about applying for classics, with or without a qualification in Latin.

With a few exceptions, the teaching of Latin in schools is now broadly confined to the independent sector. Even though it’s an optional subject for Common Entrance, most prep school pupils learn the language for a year or two at least and it’s surprisingly popular.

Rhian Harrison, head of classics at The Pilgrims’ School in Winchester, believes that the most effective way of teaching the subject is to combine a thorough

grounding in grammar with a compelling historical narrative. She has written her own beginners’ course for Common Entrance Latin, *Who Said Latin’s Dead?*, which is now used in 13 prep schools.

“It’s good for the brain and really helps with languages, including English,” says Ms Harrison, who advocates the use of technology to keep the subject lively. “Revision apps such as Quizlet are great for vocabulary and much more exciting than just translating sentences.”



A Pilgrims’ pupil on a classics trip to Hadrian’s Wall

“Studying Latin is a direct line to the past and there’s still so much to be discovered”

Many Pilgrims’ pupils progress to Winchester College where Latin GCSE or IGCSE is compulsory. At most other independent senior schools all pupils study some Latin but the subject is optional at GCSE. Around 13,000 pupils a year take Latin at GCSE but numbers fall dramatically at A level (1,350 in 2015).

Teachers at Oundle School have also devised their own Latin course. Tim Morrison, the school’s head of classics, says he doesn’t mind pupils asking him the point of studying Latin but challenges them to

apply the same question to other subjects. “Many school subjects aren’t directly relevant, but they’re all interesting and part of finding out about the world,” he says.

Mr Morrison believes that Latin has a broad appeal. “Certain students enjoy the logic of the language, learning formulae and applying them; others are interested in the Romans, their history and literature,” he says. “All students benefit from discovering the mechanics of how a language works.”

Meanwhile Sarah Tennant, second master at Repton School, the Derbyshire boarding and day school, says: “Classics doesn’t give you one unique skill or piece of knowledge. It gives you an amazing combination of literature, philosophy, Greek and Roman history, and insight into the whole of Western culture. The Roman Empire was the first EU – Britain struggled with this in the first century AD and is still struggling.”

Even today a classical education is highly regarded, not only for the body of knowledge that comes from studying Latin and ancient Greek language and history, but for the wider benefits it confers. High profile names who studied classics at university include JK Rowling (French and classics at the University of Exeter), Inspector Morse creator Colin Dexter (classics at Christ’s College, Cambridge) and foreign secretary Boris Johnson (classics at Balliol College, Oxford).

Thomas Kelly, a final year classics student at New College, Oxford, is adamant that studying Latin in this day and age is worthwhile. “It’s a direct line to the past and there’s still so much to be discovered,” he says.