

Citation

Pickens, C. (2008). Using the Classics to speak to the world: A new teacher's perspective. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* [Online], 4(1), 98-103.

Using the Classics to Speak to the World: A New Teacher's Perspective

Cortney Pickens
George Walton Academy
cortneyp@uga.edu

The way in which foreign languages, including the Classics, are taught is evolving. There are those who teach language for literature-based, instrumental purposes only, and those who want to see foreign language education cross boundaries into literature, culture, history, and geography. Foreign language educators have the opportunity to teach students how to use their knowledge of language and culture to communicate with different people from around the world. In this piece, the author reflects upon her own teaching methods as they relate to the goal of creating competent language students who are able to communicate translingually and transculturally. As a first year Latin teacher, the goal to educate students so that they achieve this level of competency seems daunting. This narrative contains authentic classroom experiences recorded by the author which are used to examine her goals and methods and their effectiveness for communication within and outside of the classroom.

It was the middle of the week and the students were tired. "Ms. Pickens, I don't understand this. It's a lot to read, and he talks funny." Those were the words coming from the mouth of one of my middle school Latin students. This is my first year teaching; I was hired at George Walton Academy to teach high school Latin and middle school Classical Culture. Every day I teach five courses ranging from Latin I to Latin IV, but my sixth period is reserved for a middle school culture class in which I teach eighth graders about the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations. On that particular Wednesday in mid-November, I passed out copies of Pericles' funeral oration – a speech recorded by the Greek historian Herodotus in the 5th Century B.C.E. – and I asked my eighth graders to read the speech silently to themselves. Admittedly, it was a difficult piece of literature for their age group, but I had a specific purpose in mind. I wanted them to encounter something that seemed initially foreign and find a way of connecting with it. The purpose of teaching a foreign language, in my opinion, is to teach students how to encounter new and different practices and still find likenesses so that they can connect with others.

For weeks my middle school students had studied Greek civilization; we had covered all of Greek history from the rise and fall of the bull-worshipping Minoans to the terrible wars between Athens and Sparta. With every lesson I had tried not only to teach the historical and cultural facts but to recreate the Greek mindset. My students exist in a world of cell phones, video games, and internet messaging. Creating the Greek mindset means spending a class period thinking about and talking about a world that exists without modern luxuries and learning to

understand how its people lived and worked: my goal is for them to identify with people they are studying on a more personal level. The semester began with a unit on the basic belief system of the Greeks and slowly incorporated history and daily cultural information. When we finally reached the Peloponnesian Wars, I decided to discuss the speech of Pericles. I wanted my students: to understand the grandeur of Athens as described by Pericles; to recognize what Pericles was asking his fellow Athenians to do; and to feel what the Athenians felt as they stood at the public funeral for those who had fallen in the first year of the war. Not surprisingly, my students failed to understand the piece when I first handed it to them. Most were only a couple of paragraphs into the piece when they cast it aside on account of its level of difficulty. I was determined, however, to make the ancient words accessible to them, so I opened up a discussion of the piece. I highlighted the speech for them, taking care to point out what I thought most important and most moving. I hoped that by rewording the text I could reveal the basic meaning of the words. In his speech, Pericles discusses the grandeur of Athens and the valor of the men who risked and lost their lives to preserve it. These words, when pulled from the text and displayed for my students in plain English, made sense.

The appearance of realization and understanding was unmistakable on their faces. One student raised his hand and exclaimed, “Ms. Pickens! I think I actually get what he’s saying.” That was the comment for which I had been waiting because I knew that when one of them finally understood the speech, he or she could aid me in explaining the meaning to still-confused classmates. And he did just that. Suddenly, the class was not focused on the ancient wars between Athens and Sparta and the death of Athenian warriors, but instead found meaning in the speech by relating it to modern wars and the loss of our own American soldiers. I had not known that they would make the connection on their own, but they did. To comprehend the funeral oration of Pericles, my eighth graders were comparing it to a model they understood. Athenian warriors were modern soldiers; the love of country that Pericles so passionately spoke of was comparable to the flag waving, Fourth of July patriotism of some of our own citizens.

I was ecstatic. To relate to the foreign culture of a civilization long past, my students had used knowledge and understanding of their own culture. I felt that we had achieved, even if only for a 50 minute class period, a sense of what it might have been like to be an ancient Greek. Rather than having me talk about what the ancients would have felt, my students saw themselves in the position of the ancient characters. More importantly, by relating the ancient mindset to a modern equivalent, my students had lessened the barrier that had so effectively separated them from the historical figures they were studying.

So often during the semester the Greek ways had seemed completely foreign and strange – they worshipped bulls, placed seven year-old boys in military camps, and built glorious temples to honor a multitude of gods. Yet despite obvious cultural differences, my students were learning about and effectively interpreting the ancient culture as something not so unlike their own culture. I taught them about the foreign culture of ancient Greece hoping that they might gain the ability to view modern foreign cultures with less bias and with a greater capacity for understanding.

Learning to Communicate through Language and Culture

The current movement in foreign language education is towards overall education – students are learning languages and cultures so that they can operate with what the Modern Language Association (2007) refers to as “translingual and transcultural competence” (The Goal:

Translingual and Transcultural Competence section, para. 1). “In the context of globalization and in the post-9/11 environment, then, the usefulness of studying languages other than English is no longer contested” (MLA, 2007, Background section, para. 4). Our nation has come to realize the growing need for graduates who are able to view the world through unbiased eyes. As stated in the MLA’s report, “Language is a complex multifunctional phenomenon that links an individual to other individuals, to communities, and to national cultures,” (Background section, para. 4). The study of language seems to be an unfailing way to teach students how to communicate with the rest of the world and how to understand cultures other than their own.

Even though the study of foreign language seems to be the answer to the nation’s need for translingual and transcultural communicators, those teaching world languages are divided on their approaches (MLA, 2007). The division falls between language as primarily instrumental and language as a tool to bridge the gap between people and cultures. In a broad sense, collegiate language programs focus the study of language towards the ultimate goal of reading canonical literature; whatever “cultural ideals” can be gleaned from these texts constitute a large portion of cultural education. This leaves the students’ knowledge base wanting. The MLA’s report suggests a reformation of language education that would broaden the learning structure to combine language, culture, and literature studies to form a more rewarding program. Students would graduate with a sense of the language and culture as a whole with skills to communicate with both translingual and transcultural competence. “The idea of translingual and transcultural competence places value on the ability to operate between languages” (The Goal: Translingual and Transcultural Competence section, para. 1). That is, students who exhibit this competence have the tools necessary to communicate from a culturally equal standpoint using the target language.

The two sides of this fault line describe lofty purposes that, for the most part, focus on collegiate-level language courses, but the basics of each side of the argument filter down into the secondary level. Before I started teaching this year, I had to define my purpose and goals for teaching language. Latin is a Classical language and is no longer spoken except by elect groups usually made up of religious officials, students or scholars. There is currently a movement towards teaching Latin as a conversational language, but I did not think that approach suited the needs of my students. I decided that as a first year teacher stepping into an already developed program, my purpose needed to match the expectations and needs of my current students.

For those students that I would teach in my Latin II, III and IV classes, their previous Latin education was focused solely on vocabulary building and grammar acquisition. The instructor employed a grammar-translation method that guided the students into the translation of modified Classical texts. I wanted to move them slowly away from the primarily instrumental study of Latin to which they were accustomed in order to guide them into a study of Latin that would provide them with an understanding of the language and culture of the ancient Roman world. My main purpose was to teach the students the language in such a way that I might simultaneously familiarize them with a foreign language and a foreign culture.

Admittedly, my students will not find any Romans with whom to converse, and their knowledge of Roman ideas and cultural values will not directly help them in communicating in today’s world. But by familiarizing themselves with Roman culture, I hope that they will begin to see the Roman civilization less as an inaccessible and isolated historical civilization and more as a once-living, breathing civilization, a knowledge of which they can use to understand and communicate with modern peoples. My initial teaching goal is to help my students lessen the “differences” barrier between them and other people; my students cannot communicate

transculturally if they cannot cease to view themselves as non-foreign. My middle school students are just beginning to cross this bridge, but my high school students are right in the thick of it. When presented with a strange ancient expression, my students often recoil or respond to the information with harsh criticism. My Latin III students have completed a study of the ancient poet Catullus who wrote elegy in the first century B.C.E. His writing is highly emotive and passion-driven; however, even in translation, his words are foreign to my students. As translated from Garrison's third edition of Catullus' corpus, "*For as soon as I have seen you, Lesbia / nothing of a voice remains in my mouth / my tongue is paralyzed,*" (Garrison, 2004, p. 51). Catullus' words are obviously full of adoration for his beautiful lover, but my students were unimpressed with his fluid language and angst-ridden words. Finding themselves initially unable to identify with the author, they dismissed the poetry as, and I quote, "weird" and "stupid." Their reaction was quick and callous, and I had to think quickly to regain their interest. So, I asked them to rewrite the poem. "If given the chance, how would you describe such passionate love?" I asked them. One student said, "I would describe how happy it made me." Another said, "Today people would just say they would blush or turn red," and yet another wrote, "I would explode with emotion and be utterly and completely confused. There wouldn't be a way to describe the love." I asked them to share with the class what they had written down. After hearing from several students, it was apparent that the words of Catullus were not so different from their newly-written words. Their descriptions of love and passion rang out with the same emotions and sometimes even the same expressions as the two thousand year-old Catullan poem. In a day's work, we translated an authentic piece of literature, analyzed the work, and connected with it. In the grand scheme of language education, I believe the connection made to the literature was the integral part of the lesson.

Acceptance of Differences and Similarities in Modern Cultures

By helping my students understand and accept a culture that initially seems so foreign to them, I am providing them the tools to recognize parallels in other, more modern cultures. Each student arrives to class with his or her own lens with which to view the material I present to them, and they use this same lens to interpret and interact with the world around them. Oftentimes the lens is too small or too heavily influenced by the student's individual culture to allow them a clear view. It seems that no other area of study is as well-equipped as the study of language to provide students with a new lens with which to view the world. The study of language broadens the lens for each student. Even if the cultural aspect of a course is minimal at best, the student is still being exposed to practices and beliefs outside what he or she knows from experience, and any measure of cultural awareness expands a student's scope of understanding. Therefore when language education is approached with the goal being translingual and transcultural competence, it results in students who are better equipped to communicate with the greater world.

As a first year teacher, I admit that attempting to teach Latin with this goal in mind results in a task that seems at once daunting and nearly impossible. It is easy to spend time on culture, history, geography and literature in my middle school class – the arduous process of learning Latin verb forms and noun declensions is nonexistent. They come to class to learn everything about the ancient civilizations *except* language. However, in my Latin I, II, III and IV classes, where language learning is our priority based on standard objectives, I strive to achieve a balance of language and cultural learning. I want my high school students to leave my classes

with knowledge of the Latin language that is rounded out with cultural awareness as a way of preparing them for postsecondary language education that will, hopefully, strive to meet the goals of communicative and intercultural competency.

With the goal of unobstructed communication in mind, I endeavor to teach my students about a culture that is radically different from their own. Since the Latin language will not prove useful as a communication tool, I strive to impart cultural awareness and broadmindedness through the study of the language. Every day is a chance to learn about the Roman civilization – we discuss literature and renowned authors, geography and territory expansion, and daily routine and social structures. I tell my students stories of Rome: the stories are sometimes about history, and they reenact the pivotal points of the Roman timeline; and sometimes I tell stories from Roman mythology, and I introduce my students to fantastical characters that defy all worldly barriers. With every story I hope to shock them, thrill them, and enthrall them.

Every Latin student I teach spends time translating Latin, and for many of them, reading Latin is their goal for the course. Though I use a reading approach to the language, and the students learn to read Latin through a more natural acquisition, the literary bits that the lower levels read do not afford them a significant amount of cultural understanding. By telling stories to my students, I draw them into a side of the Roman civilization that they have yet to reach through translation. Because their translation skills are still elementary in many areas, they are held back from a major portion of didactic literature. Toward the end of the first semester, my students had collected a large enough cache of stories and events that I asked them to pretend that they were Romans and to write first person narratives concerning specific points in history. In the exercise, each student laid aside his or her usual personality, likes and dislikes, and motivations to take on those of a historical stranger that they had only recently come to know. For a short time – long enough to write the assignment - the foreign Roman culture became each student's personal culture. The goal of the assignment was exactly that. If a student can briefly imagine him or herself in the place of the character, he or she gains the ability to empathize with another person who may be entirely different in language and culture. The ability to empathize translates into a communication skill because communication requires people to lay aside opinions and accept differences in order to connect with another person.

I realize that my students will never travel to any part of the world and find Latin being spoken or Roman customs and institutions in practice, but I do know that they will encounter new and different people for the rest of their lives. In the many years to come, my students may forget all of their vocabulary and the way in which they should decline nouns, but I hope that they retain the ability to learn about things foreign to them and to find hidden likenesses and parallels so that they might use those parallels as a way of connecting with new people and functioning within our globalized society.

Cortney Pickens is a Latin teacher at George Walton Academy in Monroe, Georgia. She teaches Latin I through IV, middle school Classical Culture, and sponsors a new chapter of the Junior Classical League. In the spring of 2007, she graduated from the University of Georgia with an A.B. in Latin, an A.B. in Classical Culture, and a B.S.Ed. in Foreign Language Education.

References

- Modern Language Association. (2007). *Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World*. Retrieved October 12, 2007, from <http://www.mla.org/flreport>
- Garrison, D.H. (2004). *The Student's Catullus: Third Edition*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.