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## Forget Mandarin. Latin is the key to success



[Toby Young](#) 6:41pm

As [promised](#), here is an extended version of an article from the skills supplement in this week's issue of the Spectator.

On the face of it, encouraging children to learn Latin doesn't seem like the solution to our current skills crisis. Why waste valuable curriculum time on a dead language when children could be learning one that's actually spoken?

The prominence of Latin in public schools is a manifestation of the gentleman amateur tradition whereby esoteric subjects are preferred to anything that's of any practical use. Surely, that's one of the causes of the crisis in the first place?

But dig a little deeper and you'll find plenty of evidence that this particular dead language is precisely what today's young people need if they're going to excel in the contemporary world.

Let's start with Latin's reputation as an elitist subject. While it's true that 70 percent of independent schools offer Latin compared with only 16 per cent of state schools, that's hardly a reason not to teach it more widely. According to the OECD, our private schools are the best in the world, whereas our state schools are ranked on average 23rd.

No doubt part of this attainment gap is attributable to the fact that the average private school child has advantages that the average state school child does not. But it may also be due to the differences in the curriculums that are typically taught in state and private schools.

Hard as it may be to believe, one of the things that gives privately-educated children the edge is their knowledge of Latin. I don't just mean in the obvious senses – their grasp of basic grammar and syntax, their understanding of the ways in which our world is underpinned by the classical world, their ability to read Latin inscriptions. I mean there is actually a substantial body of evidence that children who study Latin outperform their peers when it comes to reading, reading comprehension and vocabulary, as well as higher order thinking such as computation, concepts and problem solving.

For chapter and verse on this, I recommend a 1979 paper by an educationalist called Nancy Mavrogenes that appeared in the academic journal Phi Delta Kappan. Summarising one influential American study carried out in the state of Iowa, she writes:

*“In 1971, more than 4,000 fourth-, fifth- and sixth-grade pupils of all backgrounds and abilities received 15 to 20 minutes of daily Latin instruction. The performance of the fifth-grade Latin pupils on the vocabulary test of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills was one full year higher than the*

*performance of control pupils who had not studied Latin. Both the Latin group and the control group had been matched for similar backgrounds and abilities.”*

Interestingly, Mavrogenes found that children from poor backgrounds particularly benefit from studying Latin. For a child with limited cultural reference points, becoming acquainted with Roman life and mythology opens up “new symbolic worlds”, enabling him or her “to grow as a personality, to live a richer life”. In addition, spoken Latin emphasises clear pronunciation, particularly of the endings of words, a useful corrective for many children born in inner cities. Finally, for children who have reading problems, Latin provides “experience in careful silent reading of the words that follow a consistent phonetic pattern”.

This was very much the experience of Llewelyn Morgan, an Oxford Classicist and co-author of a recent Politeia pamphlet on why Latin should be taught in primary schools. “Those kids are learning through Latin what I did: what verbs and nouns are, how to coordinate ideas in speech and writing, all the varieties of ways of saying the same thing,” he says. “I did not and could not have learned that through English, because English was too familiar to me. It was through Latin that I learned how to express myself fluently in my native language.”

Now, you might acknowledge that Latin has these benefits, but argue there’s nothing special about it. Why not learn Mandarin instead? Not only would that have the same transformative effect, it would have the added value of being practical.

But just how useful is Mandarin? All very well if you go to China, but Latin has the advantage of being at the root of a whole host of European languages. “If I’m on an EasyJet flight with a group of European nationals, none of whom speak English, I find we can communicate if we speak to each other in Latin,” says Grace Moody-Stuart, a Classics teacher in West London. “Forget about Esperanto. Latin is the real universal language of Europeans.”

Unlike other languages, Latin isn’t just about conjugating verbs. It includes a crash course in ancient history and cosmology. “Latin is the maths of the Humanities,” says Llewelyn Morgan, “But Latin also has something that mathematics does not and that is the history and mythology of the ancient world. Latin is maths with goddesses, gladiators and flying horses, or flying children.”

No doubt some people will persist in questioning the usefulness of Latin. For these skeptics I have a two-word answer: Mark Zuckerberg. The 26-year-old founder of Facebook studied Classics at Phillips Exeter Academy and listed Latin as one of the languages he spoke on his Harvard application. So keen is he on the subject, he once quoted lines from the Aeneid during a Facebook product conference and now regards Latin as one of the keys to his success. Just how successful is he? According to Forbes magazine, he’s worth \$6.9 billion. If that isn’t a useful skill, I don’t know what is.

<http://www.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/6669953/forget-mandarin-latin-is-the-key-to-success.shtml>