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Research Article

Why is Classics important?

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Abstract

The article discusses why Classics is important and why its study benefits not just university students but also young children. It was runner-up in the Intermediate Category for a Classical Association competition in 2025. The article explores the value of Classics as a wonderfully diverse subject involving the study of history, archaeology, architecture, art, and literature. Classics enables students to study over a thousand years of history, to uncover cultural values, to discover how language operates, to develop critical analysis skills, and to delight in its timeless literature. The article explores how the study of Classics can benefit young students' reading and writing proficiency and can be especially beneficial for those with special educational needs. It explores how Latin translation builds code cracking and cognitive skills, not only developing grammatical knowledge but also encouraging problem-solving suited to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)-based subjects such as computer science and maths. The article looks at the interdisciplinary nature of the subject and the benefits of learning Latin and Greek vocabulary for language learning and science.

Keywords: Latin; Greek; Classics; importance; education

Classics is such a versatile subject: Its scope covers well over a thousand years of history, from ordinary lives to larger-than-life figures such as Alexander the Great. Studying Classics uncovers the cultural values of Ancient Greece and Rome through archaeology, architecture, art, and literature. It ponders the questions that Ancient Greek and Roman philosophers debated. It develops understanding of how languages operate, offers the challenge of mastering syntax and grammar, and builds skill in critical analysis. Classical texts can be tales of action and adventure, charged with tension, where monstrous creatures and tenacious heroes battle. Classical literature's powerful, universal themes of redemption, grief, rage, revenge, and love still resonate today.

Classics is important because foundational knowledge of Latin and Greek grammar and vocabulary benefit reading, comprehension, and writing. An Oxford University study (White 2021) gathered data about students' reading and writing proficiency before and after they learnt Latin. The researchers found that, especially in socially and economically disadvantaged areas, learning Latin can have a positive impact, making a 'significant difference to learners' progress'. The Department of Education (DoE) also reports a study by The Latin Programme (Holmes-Henderson and Kelly 2022), where 92% of students who had studied Latin for 3 years and who were previously considered 'underachieving' were at the expected level for reading for Key Stage 2 (KS2) and 83% were at the expected level for writing. Interestingly, according to the DoE (Holmes-Henderson and Kelly 2022), the Oxford University study (White 2021) showed that the students who benefit most from learning Latin are those with special educational needs and disability and those who have English as an additional language.

Classics is important in the modern world because Latin helps students create links between, and understand much of, the vocabulary of the English language. The Classical Association (Huelin n.d.) notes a large 'word gap' between primary and secondary school, citing an Oxford Language Report, which estimates that 43% of Year 7 do not have the vocabulary they need for learning in secondary school. Sarah Monaghan (n.d.) states that 'a single Latin root can generate over 100 words – 10 roots can give a child more than 1,000 words they can decrypt on their own'. Students learning Latin are often able to decipher a plethora of unfamiliar words, benefitting comprehension. Words such as 'somnifacient' or 'sinistrorsal' would be incomprehensible to most students. However, for Latin students, such as me, this translation would be simple ('somnifacient', from *somnus* [I sleep], and *facio* [I make], thus meaning causing sleep, or 'sinistrorsal', from *sinister* [left] and *vertere/vortere* [to turn], meaning spiralling to the left). In the United States, Ryan Sellers (2016) says studies show 'Latin students outperform everyone else on the verbal sections of standardised tests'.

Classics is important today because the stories are timeless. Personally, Classics kickstarted my reading from a young age. Reading and rereading myths such as the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, I fell in love with the rich plots and heart-pounding action. When listening to the Cambridge School Classics Project (CSCP) *War with Troy*, the stunning descriptions brought the 'whirring of wheels' and 'creaking of chariots' to life and pulled me into the 'clash of bronze on bronze' as ancient armies met. They fired the kiln of imagination, which inspired me to write and evolved into my love of language.

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In the modern world, classical stories are a tool in the hands of directors and writers because they resonate. The reason why classical myths have inspired so many authors to write, from Rick Riordan to J K Rowling, is because their major themes are still as relevant today: the impact of war, destiny, and the battle of good and evil. What Joseph Campbell (Persall 1999) calls the 'hero cycle' of modern stories such as the Harry Potter series, *Lord of the Rings*, or even *Star Wars* is identical to that of the ancient myths. This template is so important in our modern world, used time and time again in stories we love, inspiring children and adults alike.

Classics is important because learning Latin improves cognitive skills, such as problem-solving. In a rapidly changing modern world, it is uncertain which subject knowledge will be most useful in the future, but Latin will remain useful because it develops 'critical skills' such as problem-solving, attention to detail, and logical thinking – invaluable in an increasingly digital world. A series of studies in the United States (Monaghan n.d.) gave over 4,000 students from Years 5, 6, and 7 daily 20-minute Latin lessons and compared them with students studying other languages. In this study, which was repeated over 7 years, those studying Latin got significantly higher scores than those studying other languages. The students 'advanced nine months in their Math problem-solving abilities' explained Dr Robinson, as she believed that 'mathematics is also a "language"'. Sarah Monaghan also believes maths is a logical language that, similar to Latin, 'requires attention to systems, detail and thinking in an orderly manner'. The Oxford University study (White 2021) also concludes learning Latin at a young age can impact children's 'cognitive development'. 'There are so many benefits of learning Latin', Dr. Arlene Holmes-Henderson, a researcher on the project, states, 'As well as being an interesting curriculum subject in its own right, it can also support the development of literacy skills and critical skills'.

Bill Carey (2014) believes Latin 'trains you to conceptualize one thing in the context of many and to see the connections between all of them'. According to Latin speaker Olly Richards (2024), you have to pay close attention to the details because 'in Latin it is not uncommon for one word to be untranslatable without reference to every other word in the sentence'. As Ed Clarke (Monaghan n.d.) states, 'Latin is the best way of strengthening a mind known to man. Translating it into English is not dissimilar to cracking a code, with clever detective work needed to find each piece of the puzzle'. These puzzle-solving, logic-based skills make Latin perfect for students wanting to study STEM-based subjects such as computer science and maths, subjects that are becoming increasingly valuable in our modern technological world. Personally, learning Latin has helped me with problem-solving, reasoning with knowledge, and making connections, leading me on to love quizzing, puzzles, and problem-solving, such as the UK Maths Olympiad.

Classics is important because learning Latin provides an easy way to learn other languages. As Ryan Sellers (2016) says, Latin is an 'eternal language'. While the eternal flame of Rome may have gone out, 'the eternal language' has not been extinguished. It is part of our cultural heritage (Lemin 2020), with around 60% of all English words, 90% of all science vocabulary (Dictionary.com 2015), and 80% of modern French and Spanish derived from Latin (Furber 2021). For me, learning Latin has helped massively with my Spanish and French learning. Bethany White (2021) states, 'because it is taught entirely through its grammatical rules ... you gain an understanding of the mechanics and structure of language streets ahead of any you will gain from the study of a modern tongue'. Fittingly, an example how far the branches of Latin have reached is the word 'tree'. In Latin, the word for 'tree' is *arbor*, and this has 'evolved' into the French *arbre*, the Italian *albero*, and the Spanish *árbol* (Williams 2022).

Learning Latin benefits not just vocabulary acquisition in other languages but also grammar. Many European languages are the evolutionary offspring of Latin: Learning Latin is a unique springboard for modern foreign languages (MFL) learning. As Charlie Furber (2021) says, Latin provides 'the grammatical skeleton' that underpins many languages. 'Ergo', Charlotte Higgins (2009) states, 'a student can use Latin to grasp the bones and sinews of any language'.

Studying Latin and Greek also gave me a head start learning biology, chemistry, and physics vocabulary because of the derivation of many technical terms. When Dr Zubrod (Monaghan n.d.), who helped introduce chemotherapy, was asked what had best prepared him for a life of medical research, he replied: 'studying Latin and Greek as a child'.

Classics is important because the study of Classics is not just learning the Greek or Latin language; it is finding a key to unlock the distant treasure trove that is the Ancient World. Ancient Rome and Greece were advanced civilisations with groundbreaking developments in science, politics, literature, law, architecture, philosophy, art, and more. Much of this rich culture is documented in the Latin language, and as Olly Richards (2024) says, 'so much meaning gets lost in translation'. Therefore, to fully understand the Roman world, Latin is a necessity. As Charlotte Higgins (2009) says, Latin lessons allow students to 'glimpse into a world where people think differently'. Latin, as Furber (2021) says, is an 'incredible interdisciplinary subject', which 'encompasses many subjects as well as language and history, including geography, culture and literature', and this academic diversity makes Classics unique and indispensable.

Understanding Classics is a constant and invaluable way to understand the rapidly changing world in which we live: The classical world is everywhere. According to Sarah Monaghan (n.d.), 'our culture is a direct descendant of the ancient world' that 'provides priceless insight into daily and multicultural life of the Roman Empire whose influence was so important to British History'. The Latin language and culture have been absorbed into ours: from school mottos and common terms and phrases, such as 'A.M.' and 'P.M.' (*ante* and *post meridian*) and 'et cetera' ('and the rest'), to NASA's use of '*Ad Astra Per Aspera*' ('through adversity to the stars'). Latin is still alive in government, religion, literature, medicine, and science. It is even on our keyboards (Lee n.d.): Aside from the Latin script itself, as Lorna Lee states, symbols such as '&' and '@' are cursive script ligatures for *et* (and) and *ad* (to or at). Because Latin is everywhere, it helps children develop cultural literacy, and understand the world. As researchers in the Oxford University Classics in Communities project (White 2021) discovered, 'Our data definitely supports the hypothesis that learning Latin in primary school is a good educational choice'. Personally, my knowledge of Classics, built by studying Latin, ancient history, and Greek, has helped me understand the smaller things inaccessible to those without a knowledge of Classics, such as the motto above a local school. It is not just useful on a trip to Cambridge's Museum of Classical Architecture; it helps me understand paintings such as Botticelli's *Venus and Mars*. Studying Classics helps me understand common phrases such as 'et cetera', and even Harry Potter (with spells such as '*protego*' ['I protect'] or

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'*expelliarmus*' ['disarming your opponent']) and films such as *Gladiator* (understanding the history behind emperors such as Commodus and Marcus Aurelius really immerses me in the plot). This rich knowledge of the world around me has helped me with other extracurricular areas such as general knowledge.

Finally, Classics is important to me because it is so much fun. My love of Classics encouraged me to try Latin, so I tried learning it online with Charlie Furber and the Oak National Academy when I was in Key Stage 2. Furber's genuine love for the subject inspired me, despite my never even having met him. I started studying Latin in school in Year 7 and joined a Latin Club, even taking part in a Latin play. I am studying ancient history and Greek this year, Year 9. Classics is fun and unique: You are plunged into the depths of a distant world bookended by wars, plagued by monsters, and ruled by gods.

Classics could be given greater importance in the modern world if all pupils had a foundation in Latin. Research studies suggest that a foundation in Latin could benefit all students. While there is currently a shortage of Latin teachers, online resources such as Oak National Academy mean that is no longer a constraint. From my experience and research, when taught in school, Latin can improve pupils' vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing, acquisition of other languages, and cultural literacy. Furthermore, learning Latin can also provide a rich foundation for the sciences, builds skills in maths and problem-solving, and gives us a better understanding of the world around us. It is not just Latin: All pupils would benefit from a foundation in Classics because knowledge of the Ancient World and classical tales still resonate. In the modern world, we look forward into the future so much; sometimes it could be helpful to look back to where we came from and learn the lessons of the past. I would love to introduce more students to this rich world of heroes, myths, and monsters so they can fall in love with it, too.

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