Quick Reference Guide: Classical Languages

*By exposing students to spoken Latin and Ancient Greek through a variety of communicative activities, teachers can effectively support students’ language development across domains and simultaneously create an engaging and interactive learning experience that reflects best practices in language teaching.*

Three different instructional approaches are widely used to meet the overarching goal of classical language programs to build the ability to read, interpret, and analyze Ancient Greek and Latin texts: the **grammar/translation approach**, the **reading-based approach**, and the **communicative/active approach**. The communicative/active approach uses spoken language to support students in developing a more balanced proficiency profile with skills in interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational communication. This approach has garnered increased interest, and it is particularly well-suited for (1) addressing world language content standards; (2) implicitly teaching complex grammatical structures; (3) promoting accuracy and fluency in reading; (4) supporting a deeper understanding of ancient texts; and (5) developing students’ overall proficiency in classical languages. While some educators will choose to use traditional approaches that focus on interpretive reading, there may be opportunities to use a combination of instructional methods and one or multiple aspects of different approaches in the classroom while meeting the goal to provide comprehensible input in the target language.

Addressing Various Standards

Educators are encouraged to focus on reading while simultaneously addressing other communicative modes throughout instruction. The figure below shows how development in Cultures, Comparisons, Connections, and Communities contributes to the goal of understanding and engaging with texts in Latin or Ancient Greek.

*How Various Standards Support Interpretive Reading*

Overall proficiency across language domains supports reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension

Deep understanding of Ancient Greek and Roman culture improves student engagement during reading activities

Critical analysis of ancient and modern societies promotes meaningful interactions with texts

Interaction with other classical language learners increases interest in reading about various topics and issues

Reading ancient texts

**Communication**

**Cultures**

**Comparisons and Connections**

**Communities**

Culture is an essential component to classical language teaching, and it may be helpful to provide a variety of hands-on opportunities for students to read about and engage with culture using different artifacts, relics, and materials. It is important to highlight underrepresented voices when teaching about ancient cultures, and students should be encouraged to consider ancient stories from a variety of perspectives. To address the Comparisons and Connections standards, it may be helpful to explore ways in which ancient and modern peoples differ in their interactions and communities, and educators should consider linking classical languages with various subject areas and disciplines that have been influenced or developed by Greek and Roman societies. The study of classical languages also allows students to understand the universality of human emotions across time, languages, and cultures, and educators are encouraged to approach these topics in a way that students can relate to in their daily lives. Although classical language educators do not have access to a living community of speakers, teachers are encouraged to use technology to connect students with classical language learners, and presentations, group work, or games can also help to build a sense of community within the classroom.

Effective Instructional Approaches

Regardless of the overall instructional approach, there are a number of general best practices for supporting classical language students in standards- and proficiency-based classrooms. It is important to understand students’ individual needs, interests, and abilities, and learning experiences that allow students to individually explore concepts and make meaning of the language are recommended. The study of classical languages allows students to make a number of connections to self, and educators are encouraged to promote the exploration of students’ own perspectives and beliefs in relation to various topics discussed in the classroom. Differentiation is recommended to accommodate different types of learners, including those who require visual and aural supports for reading, those who prefer to learn grammatical concepts before reading, and those who learn best by reading before completing more detailed exercises. Educators should expose students to a variety of texts throughout instruction, and new resources such as novellas can (1) promote student engagement, (2) ensure diversity in classroom materials, and (3) encourage discussions about social justice issues, all while building students’ proficiency in reading. To best support students receiving communicative/active instruction, educators are encouraged to provide comprehensible input through simplified dialogues/texts, repetition of high-frequency vocabulary, and visual supports and gestures. As texts written by famous Greek and Roman scholars are intended to be experienced through performance,[[1]](#endnote-1) students may also benefit from speaking and listening activities when engaging with different texts in this type of classroom to support deeper understanding and comprehension.

Recommendations for Classical Languages

* Maintain a focus on building students’ reading skills throughout instruction and assessment
* Consider the needs of your students and classroom when selecting instructional approaches
* Provide opportunities for students to engage in authentic, performance-based tasks and activities
* Encourage meaningful interactions in the target language to support implicit learning of structures
* Think broadly to apply “everyday” topics in standards to foundational topics in the classical context
* Take opportunities to build your oral language skills to enhance your teaching practice
* Remember that educators’ spoken Latin or Ancient Greek does not need to be perfect to be effective
* Incorporate student-centered teaching strategies to support different types of learners
* Use pair/group work throughout instruction to encourage student interaction and collaboration
* Introduce various material remains (e.g., vases, coins, maps, etc.) when teaching about culture
* Use texts and resources that go beyond elite or mainstream perspectives of ancient societies
* Introduce students to novellas and other modern texts written in classical languages
* Support students’ recognition and understanding of different textual elements and genres
* Research, analyze, and compare ancient and modern peoples, products, and practices
* Discuss the relationship between academic disciplines and the history/culture of ancient worlds
* Use a trauma-informed approach to discussions involving sensitive topics throughout history
* Explore opportunities for students to use classical languages in meaningful ways, including putting on performances, recreating ancient traditions, and reciting poetry or famous speeches
* Consider ways to increase the accessibility of community-based activities that happen outside of class
* Take opportunities to network and collaborate with classical language teachers across districts
* Explore trainings provided by professional organizations, including the Classical Association of New England, the Classical Association of Massachusetts, and the Massachusetts Foreign Language Association
* Advocate for diversity, inclusion, and representation in classical language education

For more research and a full bibliography for this and other QRG topics, see

[World Language Standards Literature Review Report](https://www.doe.mass.edu/worldlanguages/leader-network/literature-review.docx).

1. Gruber-Miller, J. (Ed.). (2006). *When Dead Tongues Speak: Teaching Beginning Greek and Latin.* Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)