Paedagogus: The ABC Technique for Reinforcing Declensional Endings

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ABSTRACT: Because English marks grammatical relationships primarily through word order, declensions can be confounding to some students. Below I outline a technique I have developed for first-semester Latin. It is easily incorporated into most curricula, takes little time, and can be adapted to various teaching styles. Most importantly, it helps find those students who need additional assistance (even if they’ve not yet realized it). By stripping vocabulary from the sentences, students are forced to focus on form rather than word meaning. When used to supplement other pedagogical approaches, this technique can reveal that declensions have a purpose which transcends torment.

Declensional languages directly conflict with the way that grammatical relationships tend to be marked in English. Because English is the primary language of the majority of our students, I have found that some of them can be quite resistant to my repeated injunctions to “look at the ending.” Many students come to the college level with only a hazy understanding of what an indirect object is or what the word “transitive” means. In my experience, getting them to understand and respect the importance of noun terminations—rather than relying on the meaning of the words—is one of the most challenging steps in the first semester of Latin. How well students grasp the concept of declensions is a strong indicator of how well and how quickly they will subsequently progress in their studies.

Because the notion of declensions is so alien, I frequently find that my students cling to the definition of a noun and its location in a sentence. They will consider that they have “done their homework” if they have looked up the meaning of all the words, even if they cannot identify the forms readily. Many of the early sentences encountered in a Latin textbook are relatively simple, and so students can be especially good at guessing a proper translation if they have some experience with Spanish or French and can use sense or instinct to suggest what noun is subject or object, and they will simply shuffle the words if challenged in class. You can ask your students if they understand and receive every assurance, force them to identify forms, quiz them on declensional endings, and still—alas—have some sneak through whose lack of comprehension is only revealed weeks later after the homework has become bafflingly complex to them.

One technique I have developed to correct this problem early on is something I call the ABC method. I remove the crutch of vocabulary, and instead I give them alphabetical noun stems. Thus the noun A declines in the first declension singular Aa, Aac, Aae, Aam, Aa and in the plural Aae, Aarum, Ais, Aas, Ais. This forces the student to refer only to the form, not the definition, in deriving the proper meaning of the sentence. When this technique is used after teaching the first declension, and then again after the second declension, all students but the most dilatory or absentee will understand the importance of looking at the termination of words rather than guessing what a given noun “must” mean by placing it higglety-piggelty in relationship to the other nouns, adjectives, and verbs.

Here are some examples of the technique in action:

Aarum Bam videbimus.
We will see the B of As OR We will see As’ B.
Aas Bis datis.
You (pl) give As to Bs.

The rules can be adjusted to allow certain letters to function as adjectives. For instance, you might define X, Y, Z as adjectives:

Aam Bae Xae vident.
The X Bs see A.

Aa Xas Bas monet.
A warns the X Bs.

This can be used to demonstrate the importance of matching the gender, number, and case of an adjective to the noun it modifies once three termination adjectives are encountered:

Yus Ca Bum Zum amabit.
The Y C shall love the Z B.

Sentences can be made more complicated by the addition of the second declension:

Ai Bos Carum laudabunt.
The As will praise the Bs of the Cs (or the Cs’ Bs).

One can teach ambiguity:

Aum Bae laudabant.
The Bs were praising the A.
They were praising the B’s A.

One can also suggest the more likely translation based upon word order:

Aas Borum Cis dabis.
You (s) will give the Bs’ As to Cs. (Or less likely: You will give the As to the Bs’ Cs.)

I provide some examples in class prior to handing out the worksheet and write out additional examples at the top of the assignment so that the students can approach the homework with confidence. The worksheet can be treated like regular homework and reviewed either with the whole class or in groups. An alternative is to collect the assignment after asking the students to write at the top of their worksheets how long it took them to complete the task. Correcting the worksheets in my office immediately tells me whether a given student understands declensions at all and shows which students need additional help to master the concept. After the homework is collected, a new worksheet can be handed out so that the students have to work with the declensions “on the fly.” This reinforces the necessity of inculcating the endings.

Students will often blame their early struggles in Latin on the difficulty of memorizing vocabulary, but in my experience the culprit is far more often the failure to understand grammar and fully comprehend the way that Latin marks the relationship between nouns and verbs. Swift intervention is the key to retaining students and to helping them succeed. This technique can also be helpful to students who are not noticeably at sea. I am always surprised by the number of students—performing reasonably well by all metrics—who nevertheless feel like a light has been turned on after doing this exercise.