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Staying the distance: transforming Latin pedagogy at the Open University

Abstract: Between 2000 and 2013, over 8,000 students studied the module *Reading Classical Latin* at the Open University, the United Kingdom's largest distance education provider. But while many learners attained high grades, a significant proportion withdrew from study or failed the module. In 2015, the original module was replaced with a completely new course, *Classical Latin: The Language of Ancient Rome*. This article details the innovative ways in which new technology and pedagogical theory from Modern Foreign Language learning were drawn on by the team designing this new module, resulting in a learning experience which gives greater emphasis to elements such as spoken Latin, the intrinsic pleasure of reading, and cultural context. The (largely positive) effects of these pedagogical changes on student success and satisfaction are subsequently analysed using a rich mix of qualitative and quantitative data. Finally, the authors reflect on lessons learned and the possibilities for future research and enhancement.

Keywords: *ab initio* Latin, pedagogy, distance learning, technology, online resources, audio, student retention, pass rates, student satisfaction, second language acquisition, Krashen, simple view of reading (SVR), schema theory, student survey

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1 Introduction

The Open University (OU) has been at the forefront of research and practice in distance learning since its inception, and has, over the last twenty years, supported more students in the study of Latin than any other university in the United Kingdom. It offers the opportunity for *ab initio* Latin study (i.e. aimed at those with no previous knowledge of Latin) to UK and international students, and part of the OU's "openness" is that no prior qualifications are required of learners.¹ In past years, although many students had enrolled on the *ab initio* module, and many of those who completed the course attained high grades, a significant proportion of students withdrew from study or failed the module. In October 2015, the original grammar-translation based introductory Latin module (*Reading Classical Latin*) was replaced with a completely new course (*Classical Latin: The Language of Ancient Rome*) that incorporated entirely new pedagogy and technology. The development of this new module presented an opportunity to draw both on progress in language learning research and emerging technology to help our students "stay the distance." This opportunity was enhanced by cross-fertilization of ideas between members of the module development team, including one of the authors of this paper, James Robson, and a then PhD student, Mair Lloyd, the co-author of this paper, whose doctoral research was taking place at the same time as the new module was being designed.

This paper describes the role that language learning theories and technology played in shaping the new module. Importantly, it also compares data relating to the original module (*Reading*

¹ A significant minority of students come to the OU with little or no experience of formal education beyond school. Conventional universities in the UK generally require students to have passed three A Levels (the national examinations taken by 17- and 18-year-olds in England, Wales and Northern Ireland) or three Highers (the Scottish equivalent, taken by 16- and 17-year-olds). At the OU, 38% of students have one A Level or less at entry.

Classical Latin) and the new module (*Classical Latin: The Language of Ancient Rome*) in order to explore how successful the Open University was in improving Latin students' learning experience and success rates by transforming its *ab initio* Latin pedagogy. A mixed methods approach is used to address these questions. This includes making quantitative comparisons across each of the two modules for student retention, success rates and student satisfaction statistics. And to elucidate reasons behind any changes in these figures, these statistics are supplemented with student comments gathered in surveys and interviews.

In this article, we begin by examining the specific context in which Open University teaching and learning operate before briefly assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the old Latin module. In the following sections, we then turn to the new Latin module, with special attention paid to the pedagogical theories and technology that underpin its design. Finally, an assessment of the success of the new module is presented along with lessons learned and plans for future research and enhancements. This process of problem identification, solutions development in context, testing and refinement, evaluation and reflection follows patterns of systematic educational design research illustrated in figures 1 and 2 of Plomp and Nieveen (2010: 17–18), and described by Hulstaert in this volume. We expect to undertake further iterations of this process in subsequent years so that we continue to improve the learning experiences and success rates of students taking this module.

2 Latin for distance learners: the Open University context

The Open University is an unusual institution by any standards. It is a university dedicated to distance learning and one whose core mission since its foundation in 1969 has been the provision of educational opportunities to those who otherwise might not have access to higher education. Typically, OU students are older than those attending conventional universities and

most study part-time, fitting their university work around jobs and other commitments.² But the OU is also remarkable for its size. In the academic year 2017/18, it could lay claim to a student population of around 160,000 – by far the largest of any university in the UK. And of these, 1,351 students were registered on undergraduate modules in Classical Studies.

Distance learning, a diverse body of learners and the sheer scale of OU operations present their own logistical and pedagogical challenges, of course. The OU's approach to managing these involves each student being allocated a personal tutor (an "Associate Lecturer" or "AL") who provides individual contact, marks assignments and who also conducts tutorials, sometimes face-to-face but more often online, throughout the academic year. As for the production of teaching materials, this is largely carried out by Central Academics, who design and author a rich mixture of printed, audio and visual materials for each new module.

Historically these took the form of books, CDs and DVDs sent to students at home, yet while all of these resources still exist, students are increasingly accessing their teaching and learning resources on dedicated module websites. Central Academics also oversee the development of bespoke online, interactive resources for students, a whole suite of which now exist to support the study of ancient languages.

So, where does Latin fit into this? Despite various initiatives in recent years to increase provision in the British state sector, the vast majority of pupils studying Latin do so at either fee-paying or selective schools: a recent survey shows that over 75% of pupils taking GCSE Latin in England (the national examinations taken by 16-year-olds) were from independent or grammar schools.³ The Open University can therefore claim to have played an important role in providing opportunities for students with no previous exposure to Latin to gain their first taste of the language. When the OU's first beginner's course, *A297 Reading Classical Latin*,

² Seventy-six per cent of OU students are engaged in either part-time or full-time work.

³ In 2014, only 1.5% of those taking GCSEs in England with the OCR examination board took Latin. Of these, 71.6% were from independent schools and 4.9% from grammar schools. Put another way, just 0.38% of pupils in comprehensive schools, academies and secondary moderns took OCR'S Latin GCSE that year compared to an average of 12.6% of pupils in independent schools and 4.2% in grammar schools (source: Gill 2015).

was launched in 2000, an incredible 976 students signed up, and over the 13 years that the module ran, there were a total of 8,486 registrations.

But these impressive student numbers belong to the time before the dramatic rise in university tuition fees in England in 2012 and when “lifelong learning” at the OU was still relatively affordable.⁴ This hike in fees hit the part-time student market in England particularly hard. Between 2012 and 2017 the OU student body as a whole shrank by 36% (down from around 250,000 to 160,000), and in the same period numbers taking *ab initio* Latin fell from 316 to 146 (a drop of almost 54%). This decline in student numbers at the university has also been accompanied by a change in the student demographic: the average OU student is now typically younger than in 2012 – the median age of new students has dropped from 34 to 28 – and has fewer previous qualifications.⁵ Indeed, one notable consequence of this changing student demographic for Latin is that the OU now sees far fewer “false beginners” compared to 15 years ago, that is, students who have studied some Latin before, either at school or elsewhere. OU students may well be as rewarding and inspiring as ever to teach, but academics now face new pedagogical challenges when designing and authoring modules for this new generation of learners.

⁴ Or “leisure learning” to its detractors. Prior to 2012, a significant proportion of OU classical language students in particular already had degrees and were studying at the OU for personal interest rather than in pursuit of a qualification.

⁵ The profile of 2016/17 OU Latin students was as follows (with percentages rounded to the nearest whole number):

Age range: 24 and under (10%); 25–29 (10%); 30–39 (22%); 40–49 (20%); 50–59 (23%); 60 and over (15%).

Sex: female (71%); male (29%).

Socio-economic status: low (13%); other (80%); unknown (7%).

Disability: no (79%); yes (21%).

Ethnic origin: white (92%); black (0%); Asian (0%); mixed (1%); other (0%); refused to answer (5%).

Previous qualifications: postgraduate (10%); Higher Education (22%); A Level or equivalent (41%); lower than A Level (24%); no previous qualifications (1%).

In summary, Latin students at the OU tend to be slightly older, and are far more likely to be female, slightly wealthier, slightly better qualified and also more likely to be white and/or disabled than the average OU student.

3 The OU *ab initio* Latin module *Reading Classical Latin* (2000–2013)

While the earlier *ab initio* Latin module, *Reading Classical Latin*, could boast extraordinary student enrolment figures over the period for which it ran (2000–2013), that is not to say that this course was without its problems. Based around Jones and Sidwell’s *Reading Latin*,⁶ the traditional grammar-translation emphasis of the textbook was reinforced in the module by OU-designed student assignments and the final examination, both of which largely tested students’ ability to translate Latin passages into English and to manipulate noun, adjective and verb forms. Where technology was used, it further underpinned this grammar-based, rote-learning approach, with the various online resources produced during the life of the module essentially drill-based, designed to allow students to test their recognition of case endings and verb forms (albeit in a light-touch and user-friendly way). As for the synthetic Latin passages in *Reading Latin*, although they are clearly intended to be used for a graded reading approach, in truth the texts progress at a steep gradient, introducing large amounts of vocabulary and new grammar points with every section. In addition, *Reading Latin* is clearly envisaged as a textbook for classroom use (rather than distance learning): in the classroom, the authors encourage a strong focus on reading the passages (as well as working through new grammar) with the teacher’s help, while outside class they recommend a focus on vocabulary learning and the completion of exercises (Jones and Sidwell 1986b: vi). The circumstances of Open University tuition preclude the frequent teacher–student contact hours that *Reading Latin* assumes.⁷

In addition to the Jones and Sidwell books, students on the OU module also benefited from various printed study materials authored by OU academics, including a short *Study Guide*.⁸

⁶ Jones and Sidwell (1986a and 1986b).

⁷ In the introduction to *Reading Latin: Text*, the authors also stress the importance of exercise work “on the level of the phrase or single verb” and of what has come to be known as “left to right” reading, or as they put it, “understand(ing) [sc. Latin] in the order that it was written” (Jones and Sidwell 1986b: v).

⁸ Open University (1999).

This comprised a general introduction to the grammatical concepts that students met in the module, a brief overview of the material in *Reading Latin* to be covered each week, and recommendations as to which exercises in the books to complete – along with the answers to these exercises so that students could check their own work. A *Translations Booklet* provided students with an English version of all the Latin passages they were expected to read.⁹

The *Reading Classical Latin* approach suited some students very well. In an interview after completion of the 2013 module, for example, one student commented:¹⁰

I do quite like learning things by rote and that doesn't really bother me in that it fits with my learning style well really.

And while this same student mentioned what for him were some of the shortcomings of *Reading Latin*, he declared himself to be largely satisfied with the module:

... you know I think sometimes the text [Jones and Sidwell] can be a bit hard going and a bit old fashioned ... maybe that could be improved ... I am quite satisfied by the way it's going really.

Other students were less happy with their studies. One remarked:

... what I am finding difficulty with is the actual remembering and learning part of it which is pretty crucial ... this is the course I was really looking forward to

⁹ When *Reading Classical Latin* was launched in 2000, students studied all the material in sections 1–4 of *Reading Latin*. To address growing concerns about retention and progression, the module was modified in 2006 to reduce the amount of learning vocabulary and to limit the coverage to sections 1–4C of the book.

¹⁰ This and the other quotations in this section form part of data collected by Mair Lloyd during interviews with members of the 2013 student cohort.

doing and ... I feel like I'm failing it because I just can't seem to retain the information ... it's the endings for me

She went on to comment specifically on Jones and Sidwell (1986a and 1986b) and the frustration she felt with her learning:

... every time I went to another chapter I felt more overwhelmed by the ... next sort of set of things I had to learn ... I'm thinking oh my god ... and I'm kind of feeling stuck in that ... and I'm so disappointed I am struggling.

The results achieved by students reinforce the impression that the module was working well for some, but not for others. In 2013, a healthy 28% of students sitting the examination achieved a distinction (the equivalent of a first-class grade in other universities) and 14% attained a Pass 2 (the equivalent of a 2.1). But more worryingly, 20% of students failed, while 4% deferred and a further 17% withdrew. Overall, then, only 58% of students on *Reading Classical Latin* successfully completed the module in 2013.¹¹ Not that the OU was alone in this problem of low pass rates. A survey of *ab initio* classical language provision in UK universities in 2012/13 revealed that the OU was one of five institutions whose pass rates for beginner's Latin was 75% or lower, with only 10 out of the 23 universities reporting pass rates of 90% or more.¹²

4 Opportunities for the new Latin module: pedagogy and technology

The fact that students were struggling to complete and pass the module was naturally of deep concern to those Classical Studies academics engaged in Latin teaching: we were obviously

¹¹ Here and elsewhere percentages are rounded and therefore do not always add up to exactly 100%.

¹² See Lloyd (2016: 321 and 370–374) and Lloyd and Robson (2018a).

letting our students down. So when the opportunity finally arose as part of the OU's regular cycle of refreshing curriculum to replace *Reading Classical Latin* with a new module – which was eventually launched in 2015 – we were open to radical solutions as to how we could improve outcomes.

Some of the answers were obvious. When re-developing our *ab initio* Greek offering in 2009, we had decided to replace our original beginner's Greek module – which, like *Reading Classical Latin*, focused solely on language acquisition – with a more broadly based module integrating language learning with the study of classical Greek literature in translation. This was a formula we were keen to repeat with Latin, not least because it had radically improved retention and pass rates amongst Greek students. No doubt the success of this “literature and language” formula in part lies in the way it adds variety and depth to the module materials and allows language learning to be integrated more effectively into students' degree programmes as a tool for understanding the ancient cultures which they had chosen to study. It also provides those students who struggle with the language other material to focus on and – most importantly, perhaps, when it comes to retention – alternative ways to gain marks in assignments and in the final examination.¹³

It was also clear that *Reading Latin* was not working effectively enough as a textbook for distance learning, so a replacement was sought. And by an enormous stroke of luck the Open University was approached out of the blue by the Scottish Classics Group, offering us the text of a new, unpublished textbook, *Let's Learn Latin*, for which they had failed to find a publisher. *Let's Learn Latin* was immediately appealing as a course book that had been developed specifically for adults, benefited from a gentle learning curve, and whose reading and comprehension approach was underpinned by engaging stories in carefully graded synthetic Latin (mainly based on Livy). The facility to work with unpublished materials also

¹³ For an account of the design and pedagogical underpinning of *Reading Classical Greek: Language and Literature*, see Robson (2010).

gave the team working on the new module the opportunity to adapt the text in-house and to tailor it specifically for OU students.

Two key questions arose at this point, however. What kinds of pedagogy could we profitably draw on and build into this new module in order to improve outcomes? And how could we make better use of technology to support student learning?

5 Language development theories and research

One source of pedagogical and technological scholarship that fed into the development of the new course arose from the cross-fertilization of ideas between Modern Languages within the Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology at the OU, where Mair Lloyd was based as a PhD student, and the Department of Classical Studies in the Faculty of Arts where Eleanor Betts, one of Mair Lloyd's PhD supervisors, and James Robson, a collaborator on a number of papers and presentations, were members of the team developing the new Latin module. This facilitated integration of ideas from different disciplines during the development of the module and has subsequently cast light on changes introduced through it. Some of the theories that played a role in inspiring and evaluating content include the three briefly introduced below. A fuller account of these and other relevant theories can be found in Lloyd's PhD thesis (Lloyd 2016).

5.1 Affective factors

While not uncontroversial, Krashen's scholarship on second language acquisition has exercised enormous influence on theoretical thinking about pedagogy for Latin as well as modern languages.¹⁴ Focusing on adults learning English as a second language, Krashen puts forward five hypotheses, the most relevant of which in the present context is the "affective

¹⁴ See Mitchell et al. (2013: 41).

filter hypothesis.” Krashen claims that a variety of affective factors, including motivation, self-confidence and anxiety, influence success in second language acquisition. These variables are seen as “acting to impede or facilitate the delivery of input to the language acquisition device” (Krashen 1982: 29–31).

In addition, Van Houdt has reported (without direct reference to Krashen’s affective filter hypothesis) that “emotional aspects play an important role in the reading process” (Van Houdt 2008: 58). He claims that texts of particular interest to the reader promote successful comprehension while “lack of self-confidence can completely paralyse someone’s ability to read for understanding” (Van Houdt 2008: 58). It has also been claimed by Gambrell that promoting intrinsic motivation (that is, motivation derived from the pleasure of an activity itself) should be “given a high priority in the reading curriculum” and that “students are more motivated to read when they have opportunities to be successful with challenging texts” (Gambrell 2011: 173–174). As reading is a central aim for Latin learners (Balme and Morwood 2003: 92; Campbell 1988: 245; Hubbard 2003: 51; Hunt 2016: 7; Rogers 2011: 1; Wilkins 1969: 175), Krashen’s affective filter hypothesis, Van Houdt’s findings and Gambrell’s claims all suggest that intrinsic motivation and confidence should be maximized while anxiety should be kept to a minimum.

5.2 The Simple View of Reading

The Simple View of Reading (SVR) proposes that reading comprehension can be described as the product of two components: “word decoding” and “listening comprehension” (Verhoeven and Van Leeuwe 2012: 1806). Hoover and Gough argue that the skill of reading is distinct from linguistic comprehension of speech only in that the reader is responding to graphic, rather than acoustic, signals and that this requires the reader to “decode the graphic shapes [of written materials] into linguistic form” (Hoover and Gough 1990: 127–128). Once word recognition (decoding from written to linguistic form) has become “automated” (i.e. fast and

requiring no conscious effort), Verhoeven and Van Leeuwe (2012: 1807) claim the reader's listening comprehension becomes prominent as the limiting factor in comprehension in both L1 (first language) and L2 (second language) reading. As a result, a "limited oral proficiency level may make the development of reading comprehension for L2 learners at risk" (Verhoeven and Van Leeuwe 2012: 1807). This highlights the importance of listening comprehension in developing reading skill while also acknowledging the importance of developing "automated" word recognition.

5.3 Schema theory

One further theory that is relevant to reading comprehension is schema theory. Reading can be considered as part of a communicative process through which some form of message (e.g. facts, ideas or feelings) is transferred between a writer and a reader via written language (Nuttall 2005: 4). The purpose of reading is to derive meaning from the written language. As with spoken communication, the degree to which the writer's message coincides with what the reader receives is influenced by each individual's command of the language used and on the assumptions each makes about the world in the context of their own life experiences (Nuttall 2005: 6–8). The set of assumptions formed through mental organization of life experiences are called "schemata" and these are never identical for any two people. There is always some mismatch between what the writer (or speaker) wants to express and the meaning that the reader (or listener) constructs from the text (or what they hear) and their own schemata (Nuttall 2005: 4–7). The reader's command of Latin and their familiarity with the schemata of the ancient writer will therefore influence the meaning they are able to make from an ancient Latin text. The act of reading may also be considered as an intrapersonal interaction where "different modules of the mind interact" to construct meaning (Ellis 1999: 1). In reading, for example, we draw interactively on our ability to decode print, our stored

knowledge of the language we are reading and the content schemata through which our knowledge of the world is organized (Ellis 1999: 1; see also Al-Issa 2006).

There is a precedent for recognizing the importance of integrating cultural knowledge with Latin teaching in the development of the *Cambridge Latin Course (CLC)*, first produced by the Cambridge School Classics Project and initiated in 1965. The project investigated “whether recent progress with linguistic theory [for modern languages] could be applied to the teaching of the classical languages” (Wilkins 1969). Wilkins, a member of the initial project team, includes in his description of desirable skills for Latin students the requirement that they should have “something of the view of the outside world [...] peculiar to that language – the cultural component” (Wilkins 1969: 175). As a consequence of Wilkins’ work, the *CLC* integrated language learning with descriptions of aspects of Roman culture (see for example CSCP 1970 and subsequent editions). A similar approach had underpinned the pedagogy of the Open University *ab initio* module, *Reading Classical Greek: Language and Literature* (launched in 2009), which sought to bring together cultural knowledge of Classical Greece with Greek language study through the study of ancient literature in translation.

Having established these three important theoretical areas, we now move on to describe aspects of the new module either inspired by them or whose effects can be illuminated by them.

6 From theory to practice: *Classical Latin: The Language of Ancient Rome*

The challenge to the team working on the new Latin module – *Classical Latin: The Language of Ancient Rome* – was now to convert pedagogical theory into a teaching reality: that is, to find concrete ways of constructing the learning materials so as to benefit from the insights that these MFL approaches provided. As a team we also sought to draw on our own experience of what had worked well – and not so well – for distance learners of ancient Greek and Latin in the past, while taking advantage of a rich set of data on previous OU ancient language

modules, both quantitative (such as pass and retention rates) and qualitative (such as comments garnered from student surveys and feedback from associate lecturers). A key concern while producing the module, then, was to use our theoretical knowledge and experience to drive up student success rates and retention. A further element of this programme of improvements was the subsequent evaluation of how well our newly designed module succeeded in achieving these goals – that is to say, the establishment of a cycle of educational design research evaluation to enable us continually to refine the module for the benefit of future students.

To make the link between theory and practice clear, the changes we describe here have been set out under headings that relate them back to the theoretical knowledge described in Section 5.

6.1 Affective factors

In this section, we describe changes made that address our aim of increasing intrinsic motivation and confidence while minimizing student anxiety.

6.1.1 Engaging and supporting distance learners

The principal opportunities to take Latin learning in a new direction came from two sources: technology on the one hand and our ability to adapt and tailor the printed materials on the other (an important advance on the “wrap around” model employed for *Reading Classical Latin*, whereby OU academics simply authored supplementary materials to accompany an existing textbook).

One key strand of the adaptation of the linguistic materials involved converting what was a textbook largely designed for classroom use into one that met the specific needs of distance learners at the OU. While trying to avoid excessive verbiage, the team nevertheless needed to provide clear and unhurried explanations for students as to how to use the materials and, in

line with the practice in other OU undergraduate modules, we also aimed to adopt a friendlier, more reassuring tone than is generally found in language textbooks (or a “chatty” teaching voice, as a colleague once put it). Distance learning materials also need to anticipate difficulties that students might have with grammatical concepts by incorporating explanations that instructors at conventional universities would normally expect to cover in the “chalk and talk” sections of their lessons or when responding to questions in class. Students working through Latin texts on their own require a generous set of reading notes on the passages, too, helping them through difficult sentences and clauses, reinforcing grammatical points, noting points of interest about word order, sentence construction or cultural material, and again providing the kind of reassurance and encouragement that instructors generally look to cultivate in class. Lastly, students required both answers to the exercises plus a model translation for each Latin passage (something which the authors of *Let’s Learn Latin* had already thought to provide in a pedagogically imaginative way, namely by giving students alternative translations in square brackets rather than a single, “correct” English version of the Latin).

As mentioned above, the textbook on which the new module was based, *Let’s Learn Latin*, already benefited from a number of features that the module team was keen to retain and develop. One particularly strong selling point had been the compelling stories, which reproduced in readable, synthetic Latin, Livian accounts of Rome’s early myth-history: Romulus and Remus, the Sabine women, Horatio and the bridge, and so on. In pedagogical terms, the team felt that these strong narratives had enormous potential to harness students’ intrinsic motivation for study, a factor that has been identified as of great importance in both language learning and for those learning to read. The high production values of OU learning materials allowed us to extend the appeal of the materials further: *Classical Latin* students benefit from glossy textbooks (also available as pdfs online) with an attractive and uncluttered layout. These books contain copious colour figures, too – sourced by the module team –

providing illustrations of Ancient Rome's topography and material culture as well as the reception of Livy's stories in later art and popular culture. The team considered that these factors would enhance students' pleasure in using them, again increasing intrinsic motivation. A further appealing feature of *Let's Learn Latin* was its concentration on core grammar (rather than exceptions) and common items of vocabulary (the vocabulary lists that accompany each reading passage are noticeably shorter than those in *Reading Latin*, for example). In this way, we avoided adding unnecessarily to workload and aimed to reduce anxiety.

6.1.2 Module structure: easing the gradient

A glance at the data on the 2013 student cohort on *Reading Classical Latin* suggested that one key priority for the team developing the new module was to focus on supporting students in the early stages of their studies. Of those students who withdrew, a staggering 33% did so before submitting their first assignment (seven weeks into the module). The structure of the new module (which has six assignments, compared to the previous module's four) facilitated an earlier submission date for the first assignment – namely, three weeks into the module – which allowed an earlier opportunity for tutors to spot and support those who were struggling. The timing of this assignment also provided students with an earlier stake in the module and a further reason to persist with their studies: namely, an assessment score which would count towards their final grade. The early study weeks of the new module are also deliberately crafted to introduce linguistic material in a particularly gentle and supported way in order to cater effectively for those students with little or no grammatical knowledge and/or with limited or no (positive) experiences of foreign language learning to draw on. This meant that we were avoiding inducing anxiety while also building up self-confidence through early success, priming affective factors to sustain motivation.

6.1.3 *Introducing Classical Latin* website

Technology was a huge enabler when it came to providing this all-important early support for students, a key role here being played by an open-access website developed by the OU team: *Introducing Classical Latin* (www.open.ac.uk/Arts/introducing-classical-latin/; see Figure 1). This site is intended to allow students to encounter some of the basics of Latin in a fun and unthreatening way and its use is integrated into students' work in their first two weeks of study ahead of their first assignment. In an effort to support retention, potential students are also encouraged to use the site as a taster for Latin (to judge whether studying the language is right for them). Registered students are likewise encouraged to take advantage of it to help them to prepare for their future studies, increasing their confidence when they do begin the course.

The screenshot shows the 'Introducing Classical Latin' website. The main heading is 'The Latin Alphabet'. Below it, a prompt asks to 'Select the Latin words to hear the pronunciation.' A table lists sounds (a, ā, b, c, d, e, ē, f) with their pronunciations and example words. The words in the 'Example' column are highlighted in orange. To the right, a navigation menu lists sections: Welcome, SOUNDS (The Latin Alphabet, Vowels, Consonants, Stress), WORDS (Introduction, People, Animals & Objects, Actions, Descriptions, Review All), and SENTENCES (Using Nouns 1, Using Nouns 2, Using Adjectives).

| Sound | Pronunciation | Example |
|-----------|--|--|
| a (short) | as in 'man' | amīcus , friend amō , I love |
| ā (long) | as in 'father' | māter , mother contrā , against |
| b | as in English | barba , beard bonus , good |
| c | always hard, like English k | campus , field circum , around |
| d | as in English | dēsiderō , I desire deus , god |
| e (short) | as in 'get' | exitus , way out et , and |
| ē (long) | as in 'grey' (more accurately, a longer version of the 'e' in 'get') | cēna , dinner certē , certainly |
| f | as in English | fēmina , woman frāter , brother |

Figure 1: Screenshot of the *Introducing Classical Latin* website showing hyperlinks in orange that play the sound of each Latin word.

6.1.4 Story Explorer

A further key innovation from which students of the new *Classical Latin* course benefit – once again enabled by technology – is the Story Explorer (see Figure 2). While students can always choose to study the Latin stories the traditional way in their printed books, the Explorer provides students with an alternative way to read and review these passages. Using the system developed to support learners using the *Cambridge Latin Course* (CSCP 1970), the Explorer allows students to read the Latin stories online in an interactive way, using a “click and look up” feature providing instant help with vocabulary and grammar.

Chapter 3: Romulus and Remus (Part 1)

Rōmulus et Remus erant puerī **geminī**. māter eōrum erat Rhēa Silvia. Amūlius, quī Rōmulum et Remum timēbat, iussit militem eōs ad Tiberim portāre et in aquam mittere. mox tamen lupa Rōmulum et Remum invēnit et cūrābat. puerī parvī lupam amābant sed lacrimābant quod mātrem dēsiderābant.

ōlim pāstor, quī prope habitābat, frātrēs geminōs audīvit et eōs ad casam parvam celeriter portāvit. uxor pāstōris frātrēs parvōs laeta cūrābat et amābat. frātrēs eam et pāstōrem amābant.

— ◊ —

geminus, a, um twin
 adjective: nominative masculine plural

[Help](#)

Figure 2: Screenshot of the Story Explorer, demonstrating the functionality of the “click and look up” feature.

This feature makes initial understanding of the text a far less complex process than using a separate dictionary and grammar reference book to decipher meaning. Indeed, this system is particularly effective because it gives the appropriate meaning (or choice of meanings) in context, where a dictionary would provide a good deal of information not required for the particular text. In this way, reading for meaning is made more straightforward for beginners, increasing intrinsic motivation, reducing anxiety and building confidence in their ability to read Latin.

6.2 Simple View of Reading

This section describes changes that relate to the SVR, in particular to the importance of oral comprehension in reading comprehension.

6.2.1 Audio materials

As well as helping to reduce anxiety for students at the start of the new course, the *Introducing Classical Latin* website contributes to one of the key innovations in the new module: namely the increased use of sound – particularly important in a distance learning context where students do not have regular access to a teacher reading Latin aloud and/or assisting with pronunciation. The sounds of Latin form part of the learning experience from the very beginning of students’ study, with *Introducing Classical Latin* helping students to master pronunciation with the aid of an alphabetic list of clickable words (see Figure 1). The same site allows students to reinforce their learning through a series of interactive exercises, where they can practise saying Latin words out loud before clicking to hear the correct pronunciation. And in the “Words” section of *Introducing Classical Latin*, students are encouraged to acquire their first words of Latin vocabulary with the help of audio flash cards with toggle options providing sound and images as well as Latin–English equivalents (see Figure 3). Here, it is possible to listen to Latin words and to associate them directly with images, building up the association of meaning with a Latin sound. This is a factor important in developing the ability to process aural Latin rapidly, thereby building listening comprehension and improving reading skill in line with the Simple View of Reading introduced above.

Introducing Classical Latin

Review All

Try to learn these Latin words. Use TOGGLE PICTURES and TOGGLE ENGLISH to hide or show the pictures and/or the English translations. When you are ready press MATCHING TEST or TYPE-IN TEST to see what you can remember. You can also select the Latin words to hear the pronunciation.

GO BACK

TOGGLE PICTURES

TOGGLE ENGLISH

MATCHING TEST

TYPE-IN TEST

amīcus m.



friend

fēmina f.



woman

vir m.



man

puer m.



boy

rēgīna f.



queen

servus m.



slave

Welcome

SOUNDS

The Latin Alphabet

Vowels

Consonants

Stress

WORDS

Introduction

People

Animals & Objects

Actions

Descriptions

Review All

SENTENCES

Using Nouns 1

Using Nouns 2

Using Adjectives

Figure 3: Latin flashcards that let students choose to see pictures or English equivalents or both.

Sound continues to feature prominently throughout the module, since the synthetic Latin stories that students read are also available as audio files on the module website. Some of the Latin poems that students study in translation are also available as sound files in Latin, allowing learners to engage more closely with the original text and to gain a feel for the sounds and rhythms of Roman literature. All these recordings provide opportunities for practising listening comprehension thereby enhancing reading skill.

6.2.2 Grammar testers and exercises

An additional technological innovation was the introduction of online grammar and vocabulary testers through which we promote automatic recognition of words – a skill identified as important in the SVR – without insisting on the traditional practice of rote learning (found more straightforward and appetizing by some students than others). This focus on the informed recognition of verb, noun and adjective forms is mirrored in the printed materials, too, where students perform exercises that involve manipulating individual Latin words. These printed exercises are carefully scaffolded (requiring the application of clearly stated rules rather than memorization) and are designed for students to gain a direct sense, say, of how an accusative singular, present infinitive, or perfect active is formed. The focus here is always on exploring the endings of individual words (*fēminam, amāre, parāvī*) in order to help students to recognize these and to promote comprehension in the context of a Latin sentence: students are never asked to translate whole sentences into Latin. The testers and grammatical exercises are both designed to build confidence and conveniently require the kind of short answers that distance learners can easily self-assess, without any of the negative feelings that might result from having errors witnessed by a tutor or peers. The aims here were to reduce anxiety and build confidence (affective factors) as well as to contribute to reading comprehension (SVR).

6.3 Schema theory

6.3.1 Integrating language with literature

The most significant difference between the old and new modules has already been mentioned: the shift from an exclusively language-testing course to a blended “literature and language” module, where the study of Latin is integrated with that of Roman literature, culture and history. The fact that the synthetic Latin stories read by students are based on Livy

provided the module team with a particularly neat way to link the linguistic and cultural strands. In the early stages of the module, for example, students explore the history, archaeology and literary and artistic representations of early Rome, using the first set of stories from Livy's account of Rome's mythical history as a springboard. And later on the materials look more closely at themes such as exemplarity in the literature of the Augustan age, and in particular how authors of the period appropriate and manipulate stories from Rome's mythical past. The themes of translation and reception also run through the study materials. At the beginning of the course, the emphasis here is on the challenges posed by the translation of individual culturally specific terms into English such as *furor* and *concordia*, whereas towards the end of their studies students study whole poems, comparing the original Latin with English translations as well as freer adaptations.¹⁵ The integration of cultural and linguistic content has been identified as beneficial to language learners by schema theory, by Wilkins in his CLC work, and through the practical experience of the Open University Classical Studies team during its earlier redevelopment of the Classical Greek module. Such, then, are the key ways in which the team producing *Classical Latin* approached the new module in order to accommodate pedagogical theory from MFL teaching, to build on past experience of student learning and data on student behaviour, and to take advantage of the potential of new technology. But a crucial question for us to assess, of course, was how effective our new module, new pedagogy and use of technology had been.

7 Methods

For the evaluative phase of our design research, we used a variety of data to compare the student experience and outcomes of the 2013 module *Reading Classical Latin* with those of the 2015 module, *Classical Latin: The Language of Ancient Rome*.

¹⁵ For further discussion of the benefits of the literature and culture blend in this module, see Paul (2017).

The Open University's Institute of Educational Technology (IET) provided us with raw data taken from the end of module student surveys run after each of the 2013 and 2015 modules. In 2013, 112 of the 313 students who initially enrolled responded, and in 2015, 65 out of 182. These data were analysed to produce summaries of results and withdrawals (Figures 4 and 5) and to facilitate comparison of a number of satisfaction measures (see Figure 6). Comments enabled us to understand how students reacted to the mix of language and literature and how heavy they found the workload. Comments made in these surveys were also used to explore reactions to new pedagogy.

Further student comments were gathered in interviews undertaken as part of Lloyd's doctoral research (2016) and in a survey run by Robson on Survey Monkey following the 2015 module.¹⁶

8 Results

In this section we compare a number of performance measures for the 2013 cohort of the old module (*Reading Classical Latin*) and the 2015 cohort of the new module (*Classical Latin: The Language of Ancient Rome*). These comparisons shed light on the success of the new module as a whole in terms of improving student success and retention and on satisfaction with various aspects of the module. We supplement these quantitative results with comments from the 2015 students that help to cast light on both the reasons behind changes in statistics and on students' experiences with the new module. Before reporting on those results, however, we outline a number of key contextual differences between the two modules that need to be kept in mind when comparing their outcomes.

First, the new module accrues twice as many credit points (60) towards an undergraduate degree as the old (30) and so should equate roughly to twice as much work along with more

¹⁶ See Lloyd (2016: 321 and 370–374) and Graham and Robson (2018: 221).

frequent tutor-marked assignments (six compared to four).¹⁷ The increase in content and points also means that the new module was far more expensive than the old.¹⁸ The final presentation of the 2013 module attracted a much higher number of students than the first run of the new module in 2015, with 313 enrolments as opposed to 182.¹⁹ Certainly the drop in enrolments is not inconsistent with the general fall in student numbers at the OU, but the extra requirements in terms of time and money may also have played a role and may have resulted in a 2015 cohort with a particularly high level of commitment to their studies. In addition, new presentations always have some teething problems, so we are contrasting a very well established 2013 module with a completely new and untried one in 2015.

With these caveats established, we now look at some quantitative measures of change.

8.1 Student results and withdrawals

The first set of measures concerns student retention and achievement in the module. Figure 4 shows a breakdown of the awarded statuses achieved by students (e.g. distinction or “first,” pass 2 or “2.1,” etc.) as well as the number of students who failed, withdrew or deferred their study.²⁰

¹⁷ In common with many other UK universities, an OU honours degree is made up of 360 CATS (Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme) points.

¹⁸ In 2013, a student domiciled in England could expect to pay £1,281 to take *Reading Classical Latin* (£430 for students domiciled in other nations of the UK, where different fee regimes apply). In 2015, the same student could expect to pay £2,700 to take *Classical Latin: The Language of Ancient Rome* (£904 in the rest of the UK).

¹⁹ Open University recruitment and demographic statistics calculated from data provided by the Institute of Educational Technology.

²⁰ Results calculated from data provided by the Institute of Educational Technology. Percentages here are calculated based on number of students enrolled at the start of the module (313 and 182, respectively).

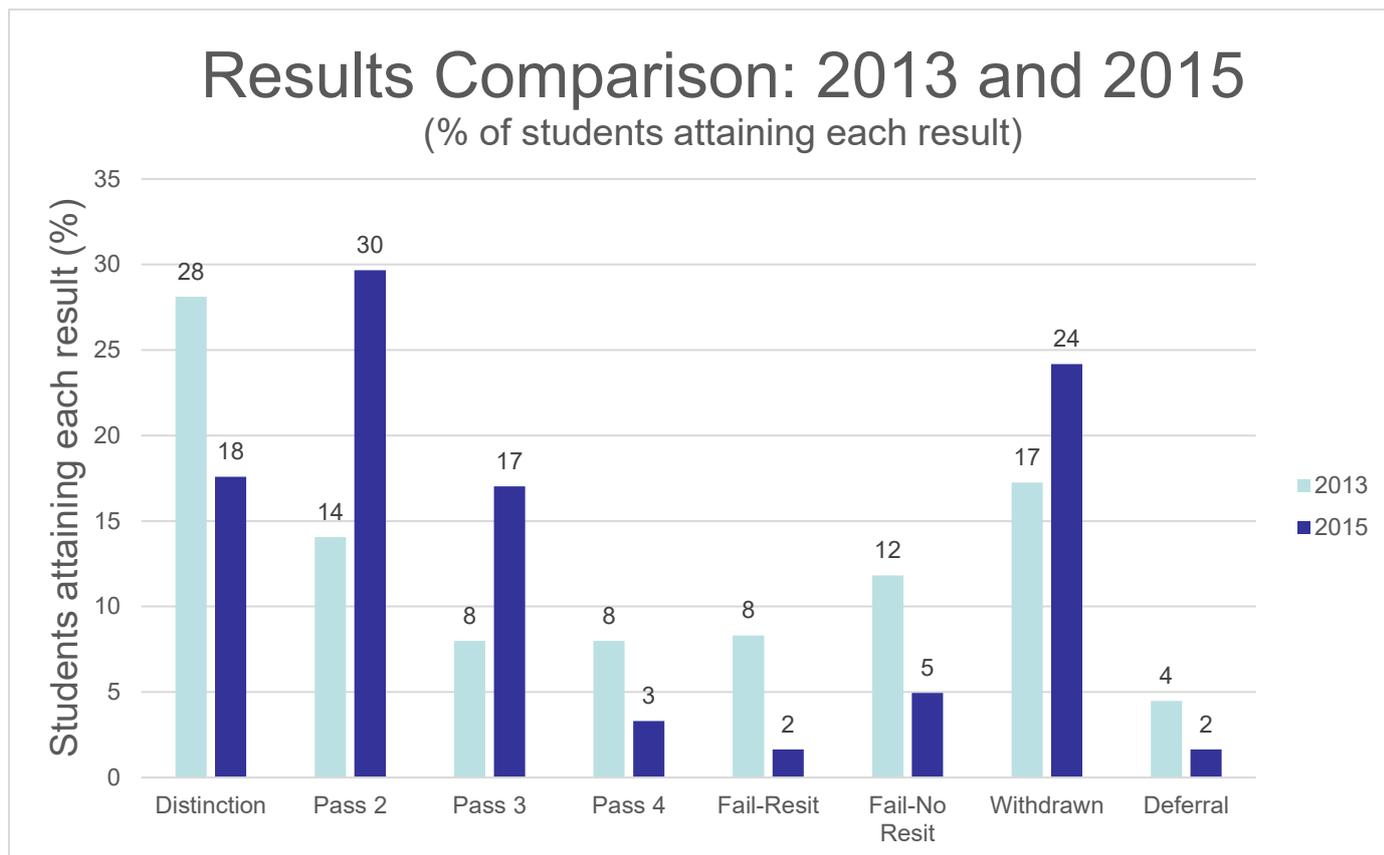


Figure 4: Percentage of students attaining each result in 2013 and 2015 *ab initio* Latin modules.

This graph shows some dramatic shifts in the proportions attaining different grades for the two modules. The percentages failing the module, with or without entitlement to resit, are much lower for the new module. In the older module, there was also a very high proportion of distinctions and failures relative to the new module suggesting that, with the old module, there was perhaps a polarization of students between those who found it possible to perform extremely well in assessments and those who struggled to attain the pass mark. This may have been because the assessment methods privileged those “false beginner” students who had already studied using similar grammar-translation based methods over those coming fresh to the subject. The 2015 results exhibit a shift to a more normal-shaped distribution albeit with a high proportion of results concentrated at the higher end of the results scale (positive skew). This may signal that the changes made in content and delivery for the 2015 module have

presented greater equality of opportunity for success to participants, a desirable outcome. It is also clear that the chances of failure for students on the new course are much lower in general than they were on the old course, with only 7% of students (10 of 182) failing the new module, compared to 16% (63 of 313) of the previous cohort. Moreover, 68% (182 of 313) of all students initially enrolled on the 2015 course passed, as opposed to 58% (123 of 182) of the 2013 cohort. If we consider only those students who completed the course, then the percentage of completers who passed in 2015 was 91% (123 of 135) as opposed to 74% (182 of 245) in 2013. Clearly, for those who managed to stay the distance, the chances of success on the new module were higher.

The results were not all positive, however. As Figure 4 illustrates, while the pass rate increased and the fail and deferral rates fell, regrettably, the proportion of withdrawals increased from 17% to 24%. While factors such as the changing student demographic may have contributed to this increase, an important consideration must surely be the fact that the 2015 cohort was studying a 60-credit course as compared to the 30-credit (more language-focused) module studied by students in 2013: in short, 2015 students were taking on approximately twice the workload. It can also be noted that there were fewer actual withdrawals in 2015: the total figure for 2013 was 54 out of 313 (17%) while for 2015 it was 44 out of 182 (24%).

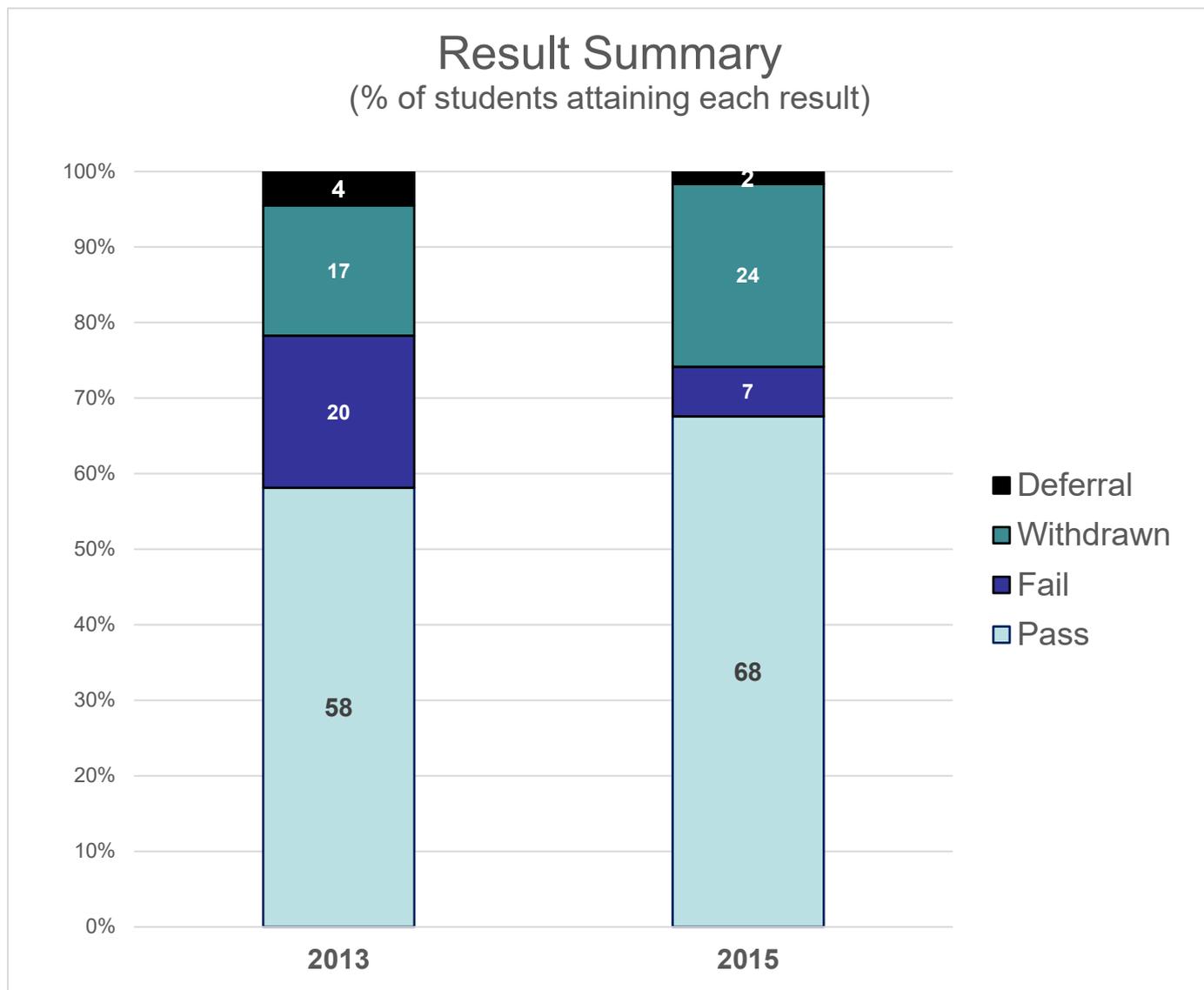


Figure 5: Results for students taking the 2013 and 2015 Latin *ab initio* modules.

8.2 Multiple-choice, end-of-module survey responses

To investigate other factors of the student experience that changed between the 2013 and 2015 modules, we calculated the following results from data provided by the Institute of Educational Technology (IET) at the Open University. In the survey, statements were set out and students were required to make a choice from the following options to indicate level of agreement with each statement:

- 1 Definitely agree
- 2 Mostly agree

3 Neither agree nor disagree

4 Mostly disagree

5 Definitely disagree

The statements covered in this paper were:

Q5 The teaching materials and learning activities were well integrated and helped me to learn

Q31 Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of this module

Q32 Overall, I am satisfied with my study experience

Q34 Overall, I was satisfied with the teaching materials provided on this module

Q35 Overall, I was able to keep up with the workload on this module

Q39 The module met my expectations

Q40 I enjoyed studying the module

A comparison of the percentage of responses agreeing or strongly agreeing with each statement are shown in Figure 6.

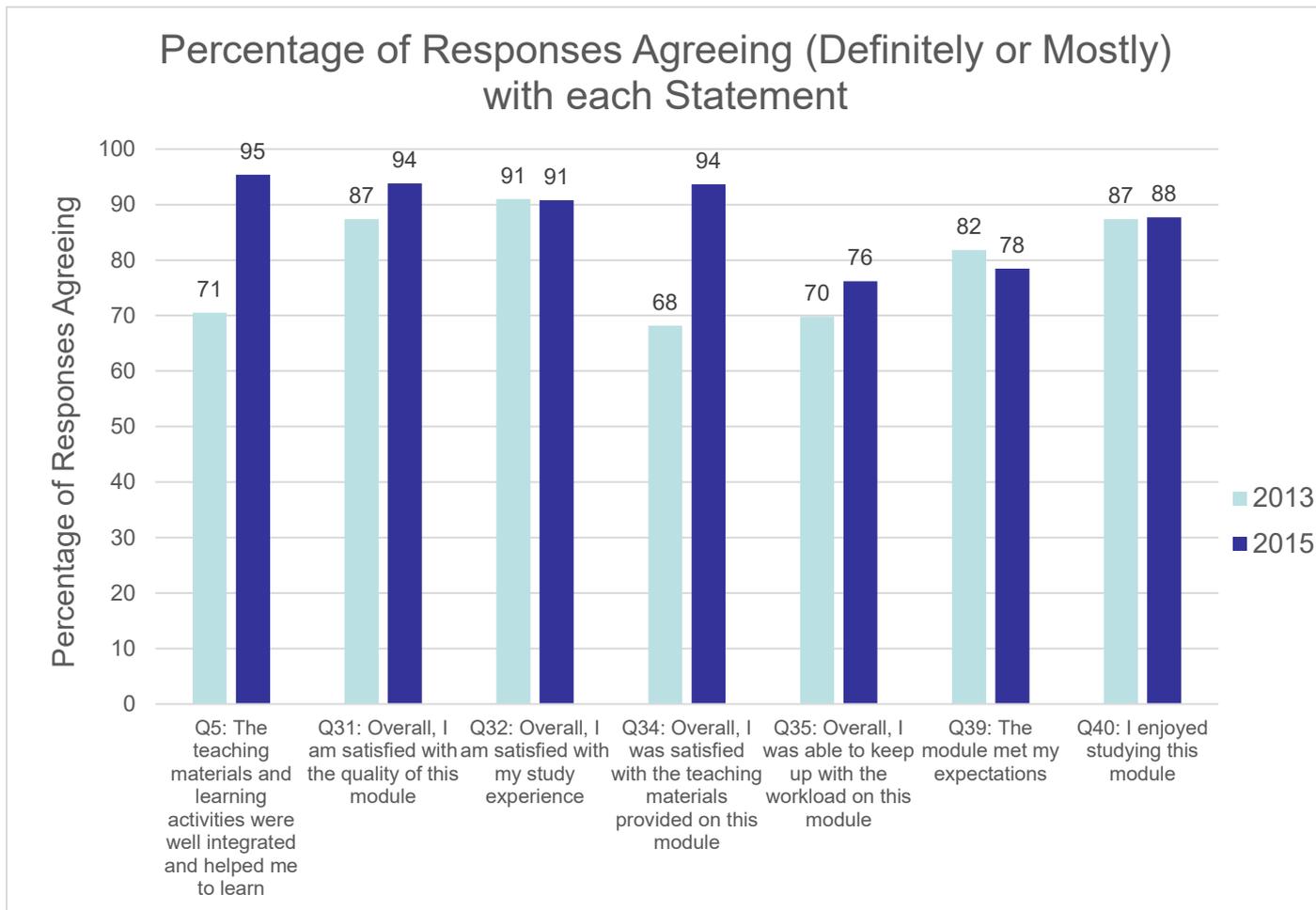


Figure 6: Comparison of responses to survey questions in years 2013 and 2015.

In this figure, percentages represent the proportion of valid responses that either “mostly agreed” or “definitely agreed” with each statement. It is evident that most progress has been made with integration of the teaching materials and learning activities in such a way that they helped students to learn (Q5) and with the overall satisfaction with teaching materials (Q34). For the 2013 cohort, 79 of the 112 valid responses (71%) to Q5 were “4” or “5” as opposed to 62 of the 65 responses (95%) for the 2015 course. For Q34, 75 of the 110 valid responses (68%) for the 2013 course were “4” or “5” compared with 59 of the 63 valid responses (94%) for the 2015 group. The new materials seem to have been our greatest success with the 2015 module and, surprisingly in view of the withdrawal figures and the greater number of credits attached to the 2015 module, there seems to have been a slight improvement in the figures for

those able to cope with the workload (Q35). However, the number of valid responses for each of these questions was just over a third of the total student numbers for their respective cohorts (313 in 2013 and 182 in 2015) and very few valid responses came from students who had withdrawn (just 1 in 2013 and 1 in 2015). The results for Q35 (and indeed all these questions) might have been quite different had the students who withdrew been better represented in the survey. It is nonetheless heartening that those students who did respond valued the teaching materials that we had made such an effort to enliven. It is also pleasing that we maintained the already high proportion of students who enjoyed the module (88% mostly or definitely agreed with statement Q40), implying that we succeeded in providing implicit motivation in line with our earlier description of affective factors.

8.3 Student comments

Finally, our analysis covers some comments gathered in a post-module survey undertaken with the 2015 cohort,²¹ as well as in the corresponding survey undertaken by IET. These have again been categorized under the headings used for theoretical concepts in the previous two sections.

8.3.1 Affective factors

Online and interactive materials

Some of these comments echoed the statistics above in indicating the usefulness of the online teaching resources:

I especially like the Story Explorer and the spoken versions of the translations.

(2015 Student 1)

²¹ These quotations come from the free-text comments provided by students on this Survey Monkey survey conducted by Robson, some of the results of which are also presented in Graham and Robson (2018: 221).

I cannot criticize the interactive resources – found them to be fantastic.

(2015 Student 2)

Students 1 and 2 clearly derived pleasure (intrinsic motivation) from their use.

Vocabulary tester

Although teaching materials were generally well received, there were nonetheless a number of negative comments about bugs in the original version of OU's online Latin Vocabulary Tester. These involved some answers which were in fact correct being treated as if they were wrong and the demotivating effect of this was clearly seen on student forums and both feedback surveys.²² Revisions were made to address this before the second running of the course and will be the subject of further evaluation in the next educational design iteration.

Workload

A number of student comments referred to the heaviness of the workload, a possible cause of anxiety and contributory factor in the increased number of withdrawals.

This course is very intensive and time consuming. ... Also, I have had issues, as a beginner, working with students with prior knowledge of Latin.

(2015 Student 3)

²² An interesting development here was some went on to create interactive vocabulary testers of their own using freeware such as Quizlet and Memrise. See further Graham and Robson (2018: 221).

This student also highlights a problem encountered by several genuine beginners at Latin in that they find the company of “false beginners” with their superior initial knowledge of the language disheartening, reducing confidence, one of the affective factors discussed above.

8.3.2 Simple View of Reading (SVR)

Audio materials

There was particular praise for the audio recordings of the stories, which were initially only provided for the Latin texts in the first book of the three-book course.

... the recording of the txt [texts] for translations where helpful, because it's difficult to know if you are pronouncing it correctly without a way of hearing it, which also aids the memorising process. I can recall the words I know are [pronounced] right but the ones I don't are lost most of the time.

(2015 Student 4)

Typical student requests included:

More use of audio to aid learning ... All stories for translation should be available on Story Explorer in audio, not just those in Block 1.

(2015 Student 5)

More audio based things would be helpful as we don't get to practice [sic] recognizing/understanding spoken Latin.

(2015 Student 6)

For Student 4, the teaching materials had reduced anxiety as well as facilitating recall of words, contributing to automatic recognition. Student 5 intuitively believes sound to be an important part of learning a language, while Student 6 hints at the importance of recognizing and understanding spoken Latin, a factor also identified as important in reading comprehension by the SVR.

8.3.3 Schema theory

Integrating language with literature

Opinions on the integration of language with literature and culture were more mixed. Many comments were gathered in the student end-of-module survey run by the Institute for Educational Technology, but Open University policy is that these cannot be made available in external reports. In summary, some students considered the balance not what they had anticipated and disliked the fact that – while the assignments were balanced evenly between language and literature – only one section of the three-part final examination paper was dedicated to grammar and translation (the other two sections involving [i] the comparison of two English translations of a piece of Latin poetry and [ii] an essay on a cultural-cum-literary topic).²³ One of the students who responded to a post-module survey set up by Robson on Survey Monkey suggested that the course should be split into Latin and literature sections to facilitate revising for each separately. For these students, the combination did not increase their intrinsic motivation to study. This said, others were extremely enthusiastic about the way we had brought language and literature together, as well as the rapid access that the course gave them to authentic Classical Latin texts (one commented that the way that the module was constructed made students feel almost as if they were reading Livy from the start). For them, attaining this goal (extrinsic motivation) was an important outcome of their efforts.

²³ The initial rationale was that the comparison of translations was a combined language-and-literature task. Students did not generally perceive it as such, however, and the examination format has since been modified to make the language–literature split appear more even.

9 Conclusion

The process of devising a new Latin course provided the team at the Open University with a unique opportunity not just to engage with new pedagogical approaches and new technology, but also to assess the impact of our work using both student feedback and a rich body of data pertaining to student performance and behaviour.²⁴

Many of our findings are pleasingly positive. For example, feedback suggests that the technology used in *Classical Latin* has had a beneficial effect on student pleasure in learning, in line with previous scholarship on affective factors. Some students identified the importance of listening to Latin, too, and even requested more audio resources. This echoes the benefits of listening comprehension to reading highlighted by the Simple View of Reading. While the bringing together of language with a cultural and literary component (as recommended by schema theory) was effective and motivating for some students; however, others would have preferred to focus on language separately and some found the concomitant high workload could be overwhelming. This perceived overload might plausibly be a product of the quantity of material that students cover in this particular module, however, rather than a problem inherent in the literature and language approach. Certainly, student workload is an issue to which the module team will wish to pay particular attention when the module undergoes formal scrutiny as part of the OU's internal review processes.

The data on student performance would appear to show that the academics producing this new course succeeded in many of their objectives: particularly significant here is the increase in both pass rates and the level of satisfaction that students reported with the teaching materials. But a number of problems have nevertheless surfaced: workload is clearly an issue for some on this module and the withdrawal rate is disappointingly high at 24%. There is, it seems,

²⁴ For further analysis of student engagement with, and feedback on, the interactive resources connected with this module, see Lloyd and Robson (2018b).

room for improvement and doubtless many ways in which we could better support the new generation of OU students.

There are specific concerns that the module team has already begun to tackle. We have already addressed the teething problems with the online Latin Vocabulary Tester, modified the format of the final examination, and provided additional audio files for students.²⁵ But there are also further ongoing issues which require careful thought. Are we explaining sufficiently well to students – and, indeed, do we as instructors understand ourselves – how an interactive resource such as the Story Explorer might best be used to improve learning outcomes? How can we best provide timely help and reassurance when students feel overworked and overwhelmed? And in terms of future research, could we follow up with students who withdraw to ask directly whether there is anything we could have done to support them better? And while we seek answers to these questions, our student body will no doubt continue to change, underscoring the need for us to continue bringing theory, practice and our own research to bear on the challenge of continually improving the ways in which we serve them.

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²⁵ Students now have access to readings of all the Latin stories in the module, not just those in their first coursebook.

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