

Classics Forum, 8th March 2011

Organised by The Herodoteans

Summary

Many students choose the Cambridge Classics course due to its focus on language and yet there are also many who give up language completely at Part II. This has several reasons; firstly, a certain level of competence in Latin and Greek is presumed from A-level which does not accurately reflect many students' grasp of the language. Thus, the language teaching in Part 1a does not adequately prepare students to read the vast amount of text required in Part 1b. Moreover, the weekly essays leave little time in which students can focus on getting to grips with the texts during term time. Finally, with no pure language option in Part II there is little incentive to become competent at the languages.

Introduction

At the meeting of the Student Staff Joint Committee (SSJC) on Monday 14th February, the members of the Undergraduate Classics Society (The Herodoteans) were asked to organise an Open Forum at which students and staff could discuss the teaching of Classics at Cambridge. This event was held in the Barbara White Room, Newnham College on Tuesday 8th March with about 27 attendees from across all undergraduate years. The speakers were Dr James Clackson, Dr Charlie Weiss, Prof David Sedley and Prof Stephen Oakley, chaired by Dr Chris Whitton. Each speaker expressed his views on the Faculty, after which there was a chance for general questions and discussion.

It was encouraging that the audience engaged with the discussion and a good number of points were raised. It was unfortunate, however, that, apart from the representatives of the Herodoteans, none of the SSJC was able to attend.

Matters Arising from the Discussion

Part 1a

Findings

- there is too big a jump from A-Level Latin/Greek to Part 1a Classics
- students' language ability at the start of 1a varies greatly depending on the teaching at their schools and length of time they have been learning
- language teaching in colleges often does not accommodate this varying language ability

Conclusions

- students start Part 1a without knowing how to go about reading their texts
- there is not enough language support for non-IG students
- language teaching may be more useful than specific reading classes, at least in the first term

Recommendations

- to ask the Faculty to give guidance on how to read texts to all incoming students with their reading lists
- to look into holding a pre-term language course for all students
- to have centrally organised language supervisions so students are supervised with others of similar language ability
- to give more language support to non-IG students

Part 1b

Findings

- students feel inadequately prepared by Part 1a to tackle all the language work of 1b
- students find little time to read texts during term when they are writing weekly essays
- essay subjects often set impossibly long reading lists

Conclusions

- Students cannot be expected to devote all their vacation time to reading through texts, especially since many will need to work to earn money
- more time during term should be spent working on texts as opposed to essays for options

Recommendations

- to offer half papers in the 'options' so students can focus more on language work

Part II

Findings

- Students often do not feel confident in their language ability to choose to take the more language-intensive A caucus and thus avoid doing language altogether

Conclusions

- students are not rewarded for their work on language in Part I since they can avoid language in Part II

Recommendations

- to offer an optional language paper at Part II
- to integrate language into non-literature papers at Part II by including some relevant set texts

Conclusion

Whilst it is recognised that students work diligently, there needs to be more guidance from the Faculty to ensure they develop, and do not lose confidence in, their language ability. If students do not feel like they are fighting a losing battle with the texts, they are sure to find more enjoyment in their work. With more targeted language teaching and guidance in Part 1a, students should feel more prepared to tackle the texts at Part 1b and even papers that require language competence in Part II.