

Latin is more familiar than you might think

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While some think of Latin as a dead language, Eli Williams wants to prove that it actually kicks asinum.

Williams, a Latin teacher at the Thayer Academy in Braintree, is currently teaching summer classes at the Boston ISEE Prep/Boston Tutoring Center in West Roxbury to help students prepare for their first Latin classes in the fall.

"I love working with kids, and it's great to help these kids alleviate some of the difficulty," said Williams, 27, who graduated from Princeton with a degree in classics. "I think more so than anything, Latin is a culture shock, and you need to understand basic concepts such as having five different cases for nouns."

The summer classes are not designed as in-depth lessons, but are rather meant to provide students with basic skills and concepts to get them comfortable with the language.

"I have a son going into 10th grade, and I saw how he struggled with Latin and how other kids struggled with Latin," said Anne Yount, who is coordinating the Latin program with Williams at the tutoring center. "So this class would get them a positive experience so they'll have a positive attitude about it."

One way that Williams gets students comfortable with Latin is by pointing out the links between Latin and English.

"I want them to feel that this stuff is interesting," said Williams. "I want them to make connections with English."

Of course, asking students to make connections with English is no guarantee that they will make the correct connections.

"Look at the word 'laetus,'" Williams told his class last week. "Can you think of any word in English that reminds you of that?"

"Lighthouse?" replied 12-year-old Neil Bogan of Roslindale.

"Not quite," said Williams. "I was thinking more of 'elated.' 'Laetus' means 'happy.'"

Another problem for first-time Latin students is learning that all Latin nouns have different genders, be they masculine, feminine or neuter. And while there are certain tricks to help discern a noun's gender, there are always exceptions to the rules. For instance, although most nouns ending in the letter "a" are feminine, there are certain words, such as the words for "farmer" and "poet," that are masculine.

The only way for students to get by this problem is by memorizing which words are the exceptions to the rules.

"Is 'poeta' masculine or feminine?" Williams asked his class last week. "I thought 'poeta' was feminine because it ended in 'a.'"

"No, it's one of those pain-in-the-butt words," said Emmit Tkach, 12, of Roslindale.

Because of the language's many nuances and grammatical intricacies, Williams said that learning Latin was not only teaches people about language, but about problem solving.

"I think ... it helps their analytical ability and teaches them problem-solving skills," said Williams. "As we move to a more service-based economy, we'll need people with more problem-solving skills."

According to Scott Barker of the National Committee of Latin and Greek, "At least 60 percent of words in the English language are derived from Latin, often through middle French (1066 A.D. and all that), 30 percent of English words are of Anglo-Saxon origin, and 10 percent from Greek and other languages.) Most, if not all, of the 206 bones in your body are Latin. (SATs anyone?)"