

Why Play Cards?

In the last few years there has been much debate about the worthiness of conversational Latin. Latin, after all, is meant to be read not spoken. But language acquisition is not solely through the eyes when reading. Even as children we begin to read by reading aloud.

Reading, as we all know, develops our passive vocabulary and passive understanding of grammar. To demonstrate active vocabulary and an active understanding of grammar, one has to use the language. Traditionally, this has been through translating English to Latin in the form of tedious sentences of very low interest. This has always seemed most efficient, especially because conversational skills in Latin among classicists is virtually non-existent.

About 20 years ago I was doing research at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at The University of Texas at Austin. At the time I was doing research on the Middle Temple Inn of Court in London during the age of Shakespeare. I came across an item (booklet? book? treatise? I can't recall...) that was about using card playing to improve the Latin skills of the law students during the age of Shakespeare. I remember at the time that I thought that sounded interesting and that I should make a note of it. I tried to find this same item last year but the old card catalog was gone and the computer catalog sadly did not have any entry that was a possible match.

But the idea has remained in my mind. Someone in the late 1590s or the early 1600s had written a treatise on rescuing students' failing Latin skills, necessary for the practice of law at the time in London, by having them play cards in Latin. Or was it by using cards that had Latin on them? Such things I have found—cards with Latin grammar on them—in books on curious playing cards of old. This latter explanation did not satisfy me because the cards would only serve as a reference. Actually using the Latin as the target language when playing cards would help develop the conversational Latin skills that I assume might well have been necessary for court. It was certainly necessary for legal documents of that age.

No matter—because somewhere in the back of my mind I registered that this was a good idea. Developing general conversational skills is difficult and frightening, and since it is not necessary, most of us avoid it. I say start small. Just the basics. And what could be more basic than a game of Go Fish? And then after you become comfortable with the basic vocabulary and phrasing, start trying more difficult constructions until those become comfortable.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with the game of Go Fish (*Ī Piscātum*), let me go over the basic rules.

- 1) You are the dealer. Shuffle the cards. (*tū es distribūtor. miscē chartās.*)
- 2) Deal out the cards. Give seven to each person. (*distribue chartās. da singulīs septem chartās.*)
- 3) Place the deck in the middle of the table. (*pōne fasciculum in mediā mēnsā.*)
- 4) The player to your left plays first. Play goes from left to right. (*lūsor, quī sinistrōsum est, primum lūdit. lūdus ā sinistrā in dextram it.*)
- 5) The player (*lūsor*) asks a fellow player (*collūsor*) for a card that matches another card he has in his hand. For example he says, “Do you have any eights?” (“*habēsne ūllōs*”

- octōniōnēs?*”) If the answer is yes (“*habeō*”), the other player hands over the card (*collūsor lūsōrī chartam/chartās tradit*) and the first player goes again (*lūsor iterum it*).
- 6) If the answer is no, the other player replies, “No. Go Fish!” (“*nōn habeō. Ī Piscātum!*”) and the first player draws a card from the deck (*lūsor chartam ē fasciculō capit*). If that card is the card he is looking for, he goes again. Otherwise his turn is now over.
 - 7) The goal is to get four of a kind—4 aces, 4 tens, etc. (*quattuor generis—quattuor assēs, quattuor dēniōnēs, et cētera*). Four cards makes a book. (*quattuor chartae librum faciunt.*) When you have a book, place the book on the table. (*dēpōne librum tuum in mēnsā.*)
 - 8) The player who has the most books at the end of the game is the winner. (*lūsor, quī in extrēmō lūdō plūrimōs librōs habet, est victor.*)

I have developed a guide sheet for you to keep on the table to help you as you begin. On the back is a basic pronunciation guide if you need a refresher.

**But I can't just do frivolous stuff in class!
Students must master grammar!**

Playing cards in Latin is not a frivolous activity. You can tailor your card playing activities to work on grammar and phrasing. Here are a few examples of basic grammar. Of course, you can incorporate more advance grammar such as purpose clauses, result clauses, ablative absolutes, conditional clauses and more as you build up your confidence. But for now, why not completely master the basics? Try sticking in a discussion about the weather while you're playing as well!

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) nominative
<i>haec charta est rēx. illae chartae sunt bīniōnēs.
rēgīna est rubra. iacōbus est ater.</i> 2) genitive
<i>ego rēgem cordium habeō. tū rēgem pālārum habēs.</i> 3) dative
<i>da mihi tuōs rēgēs!
da Marcō tuās rēgīnās!
ego Iuliae meōs sēniōnēs dedī.</i> 4) accusative
<i>habēsne ūllōs trīniōnēs?
ego librum habeō.
miscē chartās.</i> 5) ablative
<i>chartīs lūdāmus!</i> 6) noun/adjective agreement
<i>ego duās rēgīnās habeō.
habēsne ūllōs bīniōnēs? habēsne ūllās rēgīnās?</i> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7) personal endings on verbs
<i>habēsne ūllōs septēniōnēs?
habeō/nōn habeō.
Marcus librum habet.</i> 8) tenses
<i>tū trēs dēniōnēs habēbās; ego ūnum dēniōnem habēbam.
tū tibi dēniōnem meum dedī.
nunc tū quattuor dēniōnēs habēs, quī librum facit.</i> 9) imperatives
<i>miscē chartās! distribue chartās!
nōlī fraudāre! nōlī spectāre chartās meās!</i> 10) infinitives
<i>ego lūdere nōn possum.
ego tibi chartam meam dare nōlō.
necesse est tibi rēgīnās tuās trādere.</i> |
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