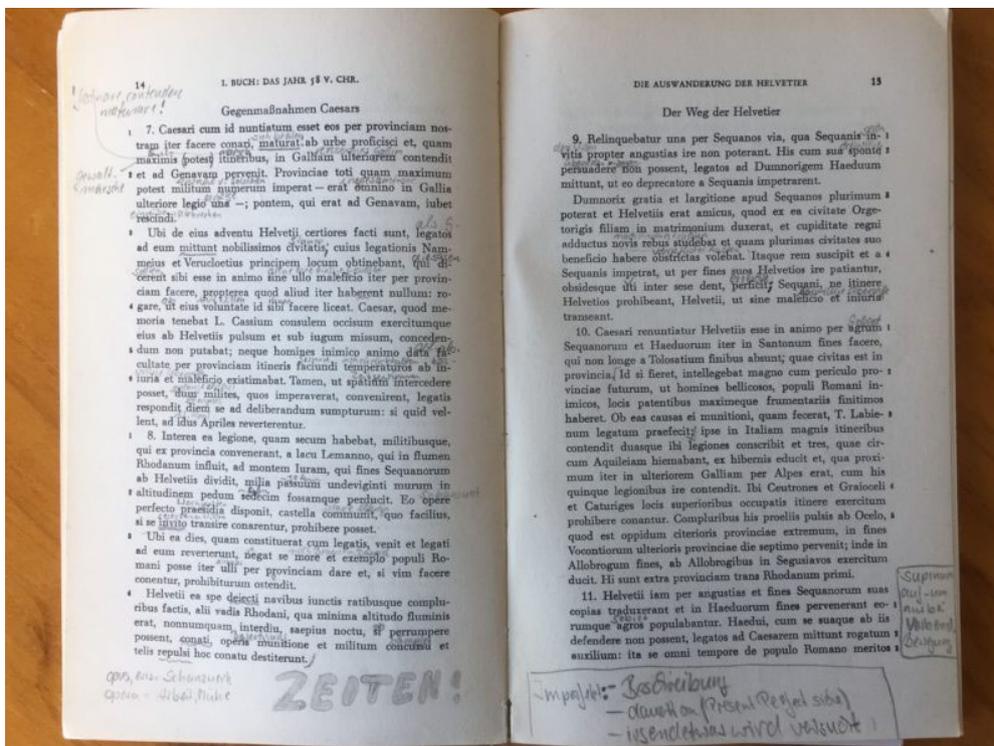


# Reading to learn in another language - Language on the Move

By Ingrid Piller



A non-fluent Latin reader painstakingly worked her way through this text

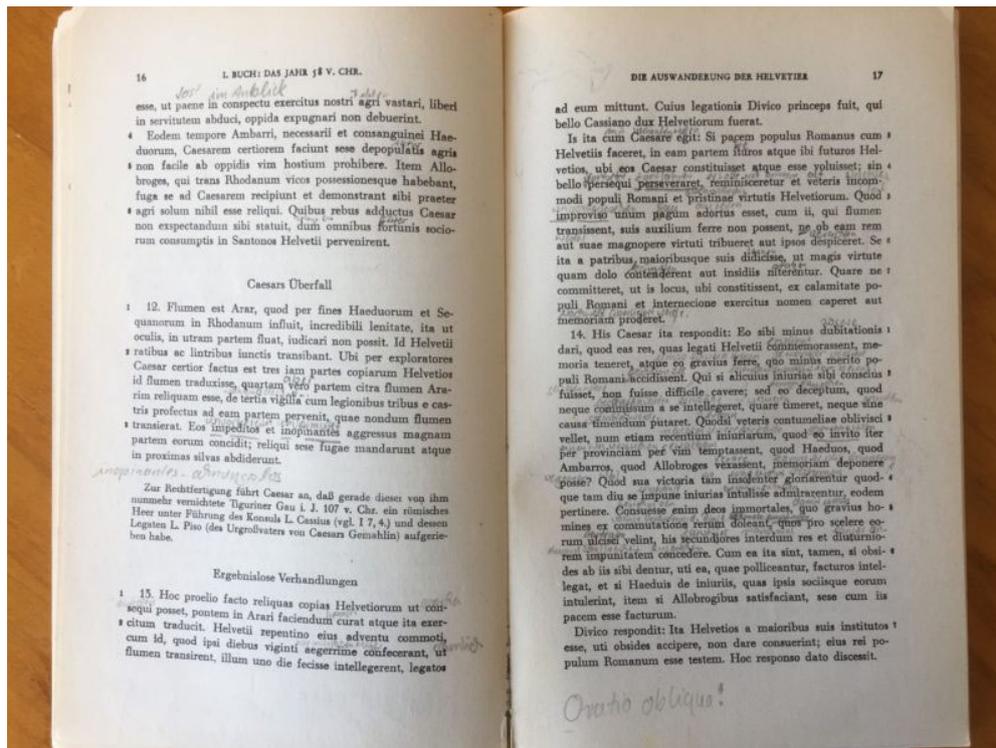
“Man is an obligate aerobe”, I recently read in a medicine book for general readers (Nuland, 1993). The phrase was noteworthy to me because it did something that rarely happens to an educated adult reader: it broke the automaticity of my reading. The phrase “obligate aerobe” was new to me and I had to look it up in the dictionary. In case you don’t know, either, an “obligate aerobe” is an organism that requires oxygen to live.

Without knowing exactly what the phrase meant, I could, of course, still guess the general idea: if not as an adjective, “obligate” was still familiar to me as a verb; I knew related words such as “oblige” and “obligation”, and their Latin root “obligare”; “aerobe” did look like it might be a combination of “air” and “microbe”, I knew “anaerobic”, and my mind also made an association with “aerobic exercise”.

All these considerations took me away from the content of the text and made me focus on the language itself. In other words, I had to do a bit of language learning before I could continue to learn about the physiology of dying – the primary purpose why I was reading that particular book in the first place.

This kind of language learning distraction happens extremely rarely to me in English and German, the two languages in which I am highly literate. However, it is very familiar from other languages I read with less fluency. The images show pages from my copy of Caesar’s *Gallic War* in Latin, which I read as a high school student. Given the copious notes on grammar and vocabulary my younger self left

between the lines and in the margins, it must have been difficult to focus on the content. And it certainly was a slow read – the way I remember it, reading *Gallic War* took up most of Year 9.



Reading in Latin was a slow process for this 15-year-old, who, at the time, was already an accomplished German reader

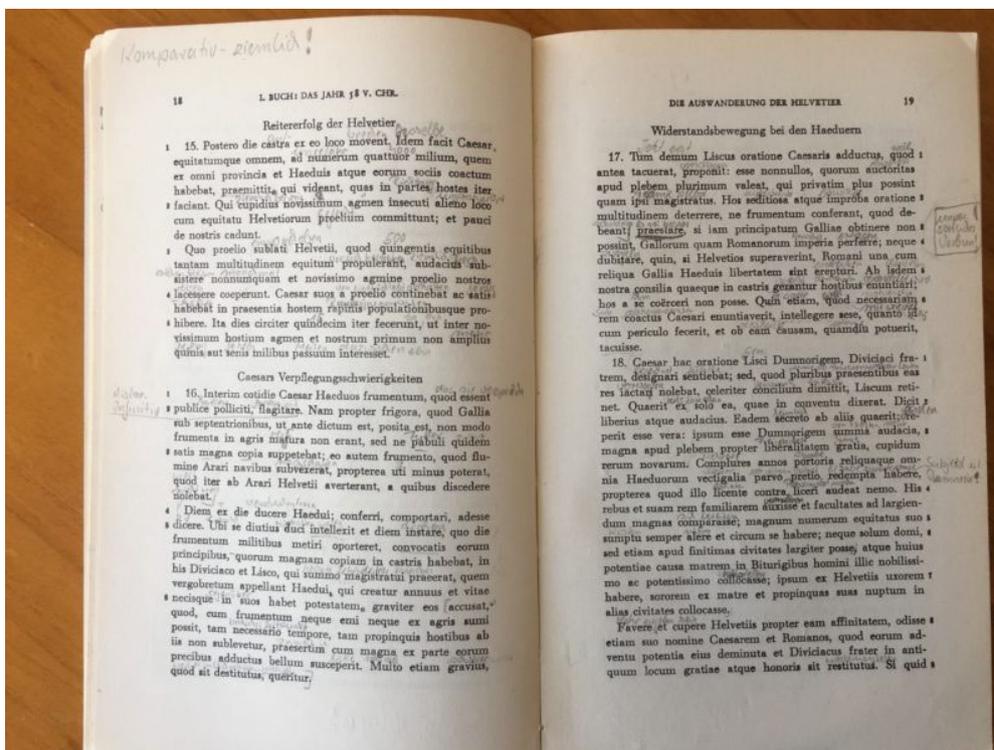
Back to “obligate aerobic”: as a linguist, discovering a new turn of phrase always gives me pleasure. As a student of medicine, being forced to learn a new turn of phrase was an unwelcome distraction.

My experience was unusual in that I am primarily a linguist and only secondarily a – very amateur – student of medicine. Most readers are in a very different position: they read for the content, not for the language. In the vast majority of cases, the primary purpose of reading is to get new information and to learn new content. This is best achieved if reading is highly automatic.

Reading basically involves matching visual shapes – letters and larger chunks – with the words and expressions of a specific language. To do that efficiently, we not only need to be able to decode those visual shapes at extremely high speed but we also need to be able to retrieve the meaning of the words and expressions they represent at equally high speed. The larger our vocabulary and our general knowledge, the easier it is to do that.

The whole point of learning to read is ultimately reading to learn.

Education is designed with that purpose in mind: the early years of schooling are devoted to developing automaticity. By the time we reach secondary and higher education, literacy learning is no longer an aim in itself. By that point, the aim of literacy is to make us more efficient learners.



Caesar's Gallic War is a puny little book of around 100 pages; at this pace, it took months to read.

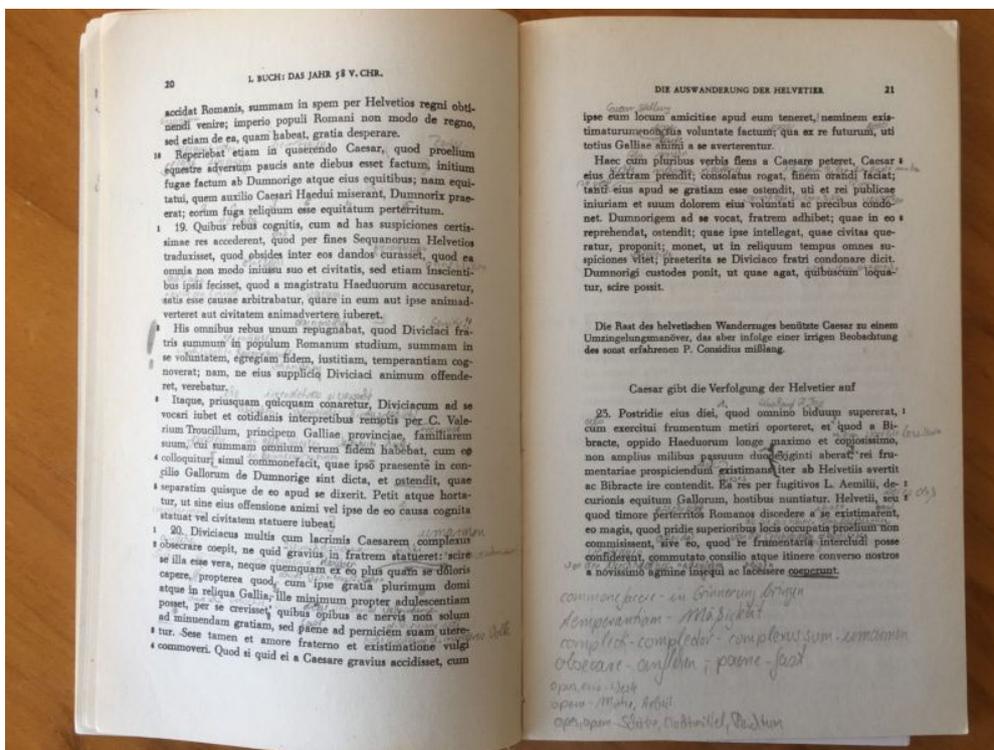
For learners who hear the language of schooling from birth, who are then taught how to read and write that language in primary, and who have access to high-quality content in a wide variety of subjects throughout their further education and for the remainder of their lives, this can become a highly virtuous cycle.

After the saying “whoever has will be given more” from the Matthew Gospel, this virtuous cycle is known as the “Matthew Effect”: rich oral input in early life facilitates learning to read quickly and enjoyably; the latter, in turn, facilitates ease of learning all kinds of content later in life.

In literacy research, the Matthew Effect is typically used to explain the reading gap between children from middle-class families who are exposed to the language of schooling in the early years and children from poor and/or minority backgrounds. For the latter group, having to learn the language of schooling at the same time as learning how to read can result in permanent educational disadvantage.

Much less research has been devoted to the gap that is experienced by students who have learned how to read in one language and then go on to read to learn in another language.

Back in the Middle Ages in Europe, the use of Latin as universal language of higher education constituted such a barrier to knowledge. As John Wycliffe, the first translator of the Bible into English, famously wrote in the 14<sup>th</sup> century: “[...] it helpeth Christian men to study the Gospel in that tongue in which they know best Christ's sentence.”



If English is the new Latin, are we slowing down the learning of students around the world?

His advocacy for the use of the mother tongue in religious education soon became a steady stream of critical debate over the use of Latin in higher education. “The main point of these critiques was that the use of foreign languages allowed professionals to mystify and so to dominate ordinary people” (Burke, 2004, p. 17).

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these reform efforts had largely been successful and the national languages had replaced Latin as the language of instruction in higher education. The change in the medium of instruction went hand in hand with an explosion in human knowledge: the flourishing of the sciences, the age of invention and discovery, the industrial revolution all happened after a variety of national languages had replaced Latin as the main medium in which knowledge was available.

Today, the trend is in the opposite direction, and English is fast becoming the predominant language of higher education. Inevitably, studying through the medium of English is easier for those who come to higher education as proficient readers of English. Conversely, proficient readers in another language will have to put in extra effort as they read to learn in English while, at the same time, still learning to read in English.

What are your experiences with reading to learn in another language?

## References

- Burke, P. (2004). *Languages and Communities in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nuland, S. B. (1993). *How We Die*. New York et al.: Random House.