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I

THE PROBLEM OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN THE SCHOOL AND COLLEGE CURRICULUM

The agitation concerning the language element in our school and college curriculum, due to the dropping of German, is a healthy thing for education in this country. In fact, any agitation affecting either traditional or revolutionary ideas is a good thing, because we must thereby, after sufficient process of fermentation, establish clearer conceptions of educational aims and methods. The idea of the unity of science is coming into the minds of our students and, unfortunately more slowly, into the practise of their teachers. It is not too much to hope that some of us now living shall see the day of cordial co-operation and practical co-ordination, not only between the French teacher and the German teacher, but even between the physics teacher and the history teacher. Then we shall see a desperately needed readjustment of content and method; hardly a single subject will be taught to our children as it was to us. The committee of Barnard students, already famous, has taken a bold step in the right direction, but needs more than one spotlight on the road, and a broader view of the terrain.

Professor D. B. Easter sets forth certain views[1] of the problem and certain solutions which are likely to stimulate discussion. He stresses the desirability of better grammar training in the schools, and advocates the introduction of Latin in the grades; while he would be lenient with candidates for admission to college who have not fulfilled the formal requirements, give them college credits for such of these as they made up in college, and let technical students (those preparing for a medical course, for instance, and those seeking degrees in commerce and so on) substitute other things for traditional language requirements in college.

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Since it is worse than useless, these days, to argue the point, we may as well begin with the assumption that *some* language training is, or ought to be, or might be, worth while for an educated person, in some way or other; that the entire lack of it is not counterbalanced by knowledge of any other subject of instruction.

The next question is whether language training should be attempted in the schools, or left to the colleges entirely. This involves two other questions: what the aim of such study is and how this aim can best be realized.

I believe that the majority of us would agree that if we could teach one thing and only one in the schools, that thing should be the ability to use English to the best advantage; for thereby is the pupil given a possible means to every other thing we can get into our heads: not always the best means, but at least a possible one.

For this purpose it is indispensable that the pupil acquire, as early as we can give them to him, certain well-grounded grammatical concepts; for he will often encounter otherwise insurmountable difficulties, both in his reading and in expressing himself. But our language is a very poor medium for instruction in fundamental grammatical principles, for reasons at once apparent to any one with even the most rudimentary knowledge of its history. Worse than this, in many places where the writer has had occasion to make observations, some of the very concepts we propose to teach are so distorted for the purpose of instruction in English that entirely false ideas and vicious mental habits seem the inevitable result of their impression upon plastic minds. Instances are the indirect object constructions (as in "he gave me a book") and the "preposition" *like.*

[1]In a paper read before the Association of Virginia Colleges, Richmond, Feb. 17, 1922, printed in THE VIRGINIA TEACHER for May, 1922.

The school problem amounts to this: we can not expect the school to supply entirely the deficiencies of the pupils' background and environment; our admittedly insufficient supply of teachers and their admittedly inadequate preparation, on the average, can not be remedied in the near future; all we can hope to do is to make the best of the situation and devise as nearly as possible a fool-proof curriculum, where the minimum amount of time shall be wasted and the maximum result accomplished with the material we have at hand. This is possibly the motive back of so much of our present agitation for the new-fangled "practical" work in our schools.

Let us examine the language problem in this light. English will not serve the purpose alone, perhaps not at all unless in the hands of a trained philologist. The modern languages other than English are open to a very serious objection, more and more realized within the last few years: that, whatever the results we seek, success depends upon the suitability of the method of instruction, while the content can not be readily assimilated by the youngest minds; that is, the worth while content that can be assimilated would better be put into English to begin with, as in the case of Hans Christian Andersen. German fills the bill best of all the modern languages in point of suitability for the teaching of pure grammar. The others are no better than English; in fact, they offer more difficulties.

Adequate preparation and familiarity with good method are indispensable to the efficient teacher of French or German or any other living tongue. These presuppose residence for a considerable time in the country whose language is to be taught and working knowledge of the latest ideas and experiments in language teaching. So very few teachers available for our secondary schools, even in fairly large communities, possess these qualifications that it is folly to build a general program on such a basis. Where properly equipped teachers are available, it would be advantageous to offer modern language work, just as a large college can offer more variety than a small one; but otherwise, no modern language work should be attempted in the schools.

The case of Latin and Greek is quite different. Here method does not amount to so much: even a poor presentation of the subject can not fail to impart the fundamental concepts of grammar: it is all in the book, and it is very clear. The Latin and Greek grammars, revised for centuries, have arrived at a point of lucidity and order that the modern language teacher must envy and feebly attempt to imitate. We may quarrel with the content, wishing that Cicero and Caesar were differently located in the traditional plan, and that Vergil came earlier, or that the method of presentation were better suited to young minds, but these things are of less importance. The fact remains that what we want to give the school pupil by teaching him a foreign language is most certain to be acquired, under our actual conditions and in the vast majority of schools, from a course in Latin, supplemented in some cases, it is to be hoped, by two or three years of Greek later on. And I agree thoroughly with Professor Easter that the seventh grade is not too early. The sooner we begin, the better, for the simple reason that grammatical concepts and feeling for sentence structure and the beginnings of style can not be *taught*—we are brought up on them, we take them on faith, we must learn them as we learned the catechism from our grandmothers, or we shall probably never make them our own. We want the children in our schools to acquire certain unconscious speech-habits, to recognize finite verbs and passive voice and direct or indirect objects and so on; therefore let us begin telling them these things as soon as possible.

Now as to the high school graduate when he comes to college we have long had pretty definite ideas. He must have had a certain type of preliminary study *as a background* for the things we have decided are necessary in the equipment of an educated person. We would not, for instance, employ an architect to design a skyscraper who did not show evidence of rather extensive knowledge of certain principles of physics; yet we would not attempt to teach an embryo architect physics if he did not first prove to us that he knew arithmetic; and the same thing applies to any other thing we teach: there are certain things that *must* precede certain things. All college teachers have had the experience of trying to teach a subject to a class some of whom lacked the essential background and with honest effort made worse than no progress. The first condition for efficient college study or teaching is a system that insists on definite preparation. If the preparation

is poor or if some elements are lacking, not only should no college credit be allowed for making up the deficiency (although, under existing circumstances the college should offer the opportunity to make it up under good teachers), but the student should not be allowed to enroll in any courses where his deficiency would be likely to hinder his progress or the progress of others properly prepared. If Latin is a requirement for admission and he has not had it, he should be compelled to take it without credit and should be excluded, for instance, from English composition or the beginning of any other language until the requirement has been met.

Any other course of procedure encourages laxity in the schools and penalizes heavily those who have been properly prepared for college entrance by compelling them to do just so much more academic work, adding school and college courses together, to attain the degree.

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The college is the proper place for the work in any of the modern languages. There the student may more confidently expect to come in contact with teachers especially prepared and to find adequate library facilities; further, his maturer mind can, with some permanent benefit, assimilate the really serious content and understand the correlation of the subject as it should be taught.

There is no reason for adjusting language requirements for the degree, if we really believe that there should be any language requirements. The smallest faculty can offer the acceptable curriculum: a minimum of two years in each of two foreign languages; and no faculty should permit a student to do more than one-half his college work in languages. It is a shame that we have not had the moral courage to insist on a year each of college Latin and Greek for the Arts degree; but having given way so far, we should at least hold fast to what is left, and not grant degrees to economic and technical students who have not done two years' work in two languages, if for no other reason than that they should not be allowed to narrow themselves too much so early in life. The same thing applies to the student who is fond of languages or finds them in the line of least resistance and wants to do the greater part of his work in them: he should not be allowed to graduate without a well-balanced list of other work to his credit. Both classes are equally in need of the very opposite type of course from that which they would elect if given full freedom. A well-balanced training and a complete background are particularly useful to the future physician, from the very nature of his work, and should be insisted upon in all cases.

The course for the degree of Bachelor of Arts will then include two years of college Latin and two of either French or German, with a small number of candidates offering Greek; the other degrees will mean that the candidates have offered two years each of French and German. Spanish must not be substituted for German: it can not replace German, and in any case the substitution should not be permitted because of the specious practical arguments urged; to sanction it is not intellectually honest: we should be able to vouch for our wares as advertised. Spanish must be an elective.

To summarize: Latin is the most suitable language for the schools, and should be begun in the last years of the grades; the modern languages should in general not be attempted in the schools at all; rigid entrance requirements should be maintained by the colleges, and deficiencies in the training of entering students should be made up in college, but this should on no account carry with it college credit; French and German should be the standard modern language courses, two years of each, for the degree of B. S., two years of college grade Latin to replace one of these for the A. B.; no student to be permitted to take more than one-half his college work in language.

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We teachers—whether of languages, ancient or modern, or of physics, or of history or what not—are gradually coming together in a great task: that of planning for the intellectual life and development of the youth that pass through our influence at a period when that influence *may* be the greatest directing force in their existence; fewer and fewer of us are taking advantage of that opportunity for special pleading or advertisement of our own subjects, our own points of view. We should never compromise: that implies essentially irreconcilable positions; we should try to understand, to fit our subjects together and co-operate.

Henry Dexter Learned